

A Nation of Love:

Pravda za Davida and Affective Resistance in Banja Luka

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This dissertation contains no material accepted for any other degrees in any other institutions. It contains no previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference. Signed, Dana McKelvey

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Abstract

Through the affective lens of friendship, care, and love, this thesis opens with the case of the police murder of David Dragičević in Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina and subsequent protests seeking justice under the collective *Pravda za Davida*. Beyond the protests themselves, the aftermath of David's murder reveals further questions of livelihood, corruption, and the imagined futures of the youth of Bosnia, and especially of *Republika Srpska*. Now led by a small, intimate group, *Pravda za Davida* is marked by processes of collective joy and mourning that in themselves encapsulate resistance. Beyond David's murder as a case of direct violence, the thesis also takes into account everyday Banjalukans' navigation of ambient corruption through practices that are not passive but rather imbued with agency and a demonstrable desire to develop relations of friendship and care against the neglectful state. These relations complexify young Banjalukans' decision whether to stay in Bosnia and resist, or to leave, placing them in a "bridge-like" state strung geographically in-between hegemony influencing Bosnia, but also temporally between the past and the future.

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Introduction

On March 18, 2018, 21-year old David Dragičević went missing in Banja Luka. When his body was found days later in a shallow creek of the river Vrbas, it was clear that the state-sanctioned autopsy report that declared his death a suicide, and demonized him via the later falsified presence of recreational drugs in his system, could not be trusted. This distrust was corroborated when David's father Davor Dragičević secured a private autopsy report from a pathologist in Serbia that suggested evidence of protracted torture on David's body from weapons resembling police batons. In revolt against empirical evidence, president of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik¹ as well as state-funded media painted David as a junkie and deviant, and Davor as a puppet of the opposition party, of George Soros, and of a NATO/EU apparatus that seeks the demise of *Republika Srpska*. What was from the beginning a disturbing and confounding case has now given way to the largest social movement in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina—*Pravda za Davida* or Justice for David.

Despite accusations bordering upon treason, Davor Dragičević tirelessly led a protest in the town's main square every day, one of which, in October 2018, reached 40,000 participants, including thousands from diaspora communities in Germany, Austria, and beyond, as well as citizens of non-Serb dominated cities from other regions of Bosnia. Whether the daily protest was massive or attended by a few, a song that David himself wrote and recorded at age sixteen was sung in unison, and his lyrics blaring from the speakers became a rhythmic part of the everyday cityscape: "It looks like I'm not gonna get away/because I'm just another peon in this story/I'm not going anywhere, I've done the damage/I'm just another kid in the ghetto."

Still, the Ministry of the Interior could not provide sufficient evidence that it was a murder rather than a suicide, nor name a perpetrator. Unable to trust the ministry or local police, who already destroyed evidence given to them in the spring by witnesses from the night David went missing, Davor took upon himself the labor of seeking justice, turning to representatives of the European Union and embassies housed in Sarajevo for institutional and retributive support, and accruing evidence that he told me he could no longer share with local authorities. Tensions peaked on

¹ Milorad Dodik served as the president of Republika Srpska from 2010 to 2018 and served as the Serb member of the tri-partite Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2022 to the present (2025), thus able to exert influence on the R.S. regardless of his status as president. Historically, he also served as prime minister of the R.S. from 1998 to 2001 and 2006 to 2010. Originally welcomed in the post-war years as a moderate by the West, he has become increasingly nationalist and sympathetic to the rise of the right in other countries; he has welcomed Viktor Orbán in Banja Luka in hopes of fostering a R.S.-Hungary alliance, as well as met with Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara and Vladimir Putin in Moscow, who he touts as his most powerful ally and an Orthodox "brother." See Chapter One for further explanation of Dodik's role the structure of Republika Srpska.

December 25, 2018, when special police forces in Banja Luka, taking advantage of the holiday and subsequent dearth of media coverage, stormed the daily protest on the square, destroying the heart-shaped memorial of photographs, flowers, and candles that had stood for eight months. They incited violence against protesters, culminating in what is now memorialized as “Bloody Christmas” by the movement. David’s mother Suzana Radanović, who presented a photograph of David to the wall of police, repeatedly asking who killed her son, was detained, as was Davor himself. Ultimately fleeing and retreating into exile in Austria, Davor remained there until October 2021; all the while, he and Suzana, who resides in Austria, remained active in their pursuit of justice.

As we can see in the cases of David’s torture and murder, of Davor and the protestors’ vulnerable assemblage and police encounters, and also of Davor’s expulsion, state power constricts the intimate choices and movements of bodies in Banja Luka. Perhaps more virulently than any other space in the region, citizens of *Republika Srpska* are thus often characterized as fatigued—uninterested in or incapable of internal resistance via post-colonial narratives of lack, and instead cast as a reserve of still violently nationalistic Serbs that can only be saved or “managed” by the imagined West despite the west’s complicit role in creating the entity itself. But, quite in contrary to fatigue, my ethnography shows the *Pravda* activists and everyday people as re-configuring the unstable and “bridge-like existence,” which I will define in chapter one, into a potent exemplar of affect-driven resistance.

My definition of resistance is located not only in protest, but also in the “rumour, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures” that amount to less visible but still highly potent coping mechanisms (Scott, 1985, p. xvi). As is clear from my title, I have privileged the concept of “love” and placed it alongside what I call “affective resistance.” I use affect to conjure Sara Ahmed’s definition of emotions as *actions* with political potential; while colloquial terms related to affect such as emotion or feeling are sometimes used, I ultimately choose affect to highlight the “economies” of feeling that bind my informants to their beliefs, ways of being, and to one another (Ahmed, 2004). “Affective resistance” can be defined throughout the thesis as resistance that takes place within and beyond quotidian moments, and is my intentional articulation of resistance as constantly intersubjective, performed, and lived. Much like contemporary literature on “citizenship” has resisted the impulse to tie citizenship to the state and to ignore action “beyond and below” national borders, the concept of affective resistance seeks to do the same for “resistance”—which I witnessed in embodied street protest but also in the *Pravda* activists’ rituals of mourning and in Banjalukans’ everyday sociality in the

city (Hromadžić 2024). I hope that this approach helps us to think about what it means to resist in relation to affective experiences.

Thus, this thesis explores the struggle to maintain hope in the face of direct violence, as in the case of David's murder, but also in relation to the symbolic violence of corruption that extends beyond the case of David. In the present day, everyday lives of Banjalukans are colored by the violence and neglect of the broader Bosnian state, and especially the pseudo state of *Republika Srpska*, whose reach deeply influences citizens' everyday lives and imagined futures. David's lyrics in his tragically prophetic song "*Klinac u Getu*" or "Kid in the Ghetto," state that he is not going to "get away" or "go anywhere"; rather, his being amounts to a "peon in this story" and "just another kid in the ghetto." His lyrics nod to the broader social context, in which not only David but also his peers become "peons" in the story of ongoing corruption and "kids in the ghetto" who must reckon with the question of future livelihood in a system that all too often comes up short.

My ethnography includes activism alongside the still-standing members of *Pravda za Davida*, which has evolved into a close group of individuals whose daily gatherings mark a different kind of protest—one that illuminates the ways that affective relations of friendship and love can open pathways for political change. Following Stef Jansen's quest to "sense the political" even in "mundane desire[s]," I do not focus on social movement theory as such, but rather seek to highlight the *Pravda* activists' affective processes of grieving, anger, dejection, and healing, and to relate it to Banjalukans' broader story (Jansen, 2015, p. 59).

By expanding my study beyond the scope of "protest" as such, I explore how people cope with the situation in Banja Luka, capital of the insecure pseudo-state of *Republika Srpska*. The *Pravda* activists' and also everyday citizens' stories show that the city's temporality, often characterized along with the broader region as stuck "in transition," in fact allows for affective interpersonal connections with political potential. While they experience delays, uncertainties, and crises in planning futures, and in the worst case, ambient and direct violence from the state, they also come to embody power "from below" by leveraging mutually beneficial relationships with one another. In my exploration of these relations, I choose the lens of "affect" and "emotion" as defined by Sara Ahmed as something we *do* rather than something to be statically possessed. Via the circulation of affect, or, an affective economy, such emotions become political in that they "align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 119). My ethnography, rooted in crises and taking place in the time of the Covid-19 crisis, hopes to illustrate how Banjalukans subvert the

“intense” attachments forged in the “bridge-like existence” of living in Bosnia, ever geographically and temporally in-between, from a difficult fate to one imbued with agency—a state of being in a close, familiar social world that could even be described as “a nation of love.” As Jelena M, a *Pravda* activist put it,

“They are talking about love, about relationships. Stories. You know, we are always talking about that. You all in the U.S., maybe you have a couple friends. Maybe you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend, but that’s it. We have so much more. We are a nation of love.”

As I will explain further in sections II and III, my methodology itself mirrors this relational focus on love, privileging friendship and trust and including the formation and extension of long-term relationships built from inhabiting the field on and off since 2013. My informants primarily constitute two groups that partake in interweaving narratives: the first, activists from the group *Pravda za Davida*, whose mission is “justice for David and for all of the youth of Bosnia and Herzegovina,” and the second, the youth themselves of Banja Luka who navigate their everyday anxieties and imagined futures within the insecure entity of Republika Srpska, or from the view of the diaspora after leaving their home.

I. Mapping Banja Luka

In this section, I will “map” Banja Luka as a distinct space in the Balkans. Here, I use “map” to imply the tracing of an imagined geography beyond the physical, through which I will prioritize peoples’ emotional reactions to and *relation* to the space (Said, 1977). Through a framework of representational or “lived” space, I pay special attention here and later in the thesis to contested and even “clandestine” ways of defining Banja Luka (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). *De facto* capital of Republika Srpska or the Serb Republic, the very existence of Banja Luka can elicit a strong response from Bosnians living outside of *Republika Srpska*, as well as citizens of other parts of the former Yugoslavia. Even in my experience of informal discussions with prominent scholars in the field, Banja Luka has been referred to dismissively as the “asshole” of the region. With the aim in mind to disentangle the deeply problematic rhetoric of the state from the lived experience of its people, I hope to map Banjalukan’s lived, contradictory, and messy relation to their home. Thus, the following spatio-temporal context will not only provide necessary background for those unfamiliar with the region, but also will in itself explain the affective sources, and trace the histories of formal and informal protest in *Republika Srpska*.

I.a. Spatial—Banja Luka’s geopolitics

Divvying Bosnia’s map into its post-Dayton borders of republics, federations, districts, and cantons is the first challenge in mapping Banja Luka. The *de facto* capital of *Republika Srpska* within Bosnia and Herzegovina, Banja Luka holds the administration of one entity of the post-Dayton Accords state, while the central administration resides in Sarajevo, the capital of both the Bosnia and Herzegovina or BiH state and of the other entity, the Federation. *Republika Srpska* or the R.S. by population, political discourse, and pervasive cultural practices and symbols, is the Serb or Orthodox-dominated entity, while the Federation is the Bosniak or Muslim-dominated entity. A third district, the Brčko District, sits to the north of the Federation and in between two halves of the R.S. A self-governing “condominium” of the Federation and the R.S. that “belongs” to both entities, it is in practice a self-governing city.

At the same time that both the R.S. and the Federation have their own presidents, as well as judicial systems and police forces, Bosnia and Herzegovina or BiH has three ethnic presidents representing the Serb, Bosniak, and Catholic Croat populations, respectively. These “constituent” populations, and the non-constituent minorities (of Roma, Jews, Hungarians, and Macedonians, among others) thus continue to exist in a schema created in 1995 at the close of the Bosnian War that fossilizes a primordial view of warring peoples—perhaps even peoples incapable of self-governance (Gagnon, V.P., Jr., 2006). To this day, the nexus of five presidents is overseen by the Office of the High Representative, a figure selected by the Peace Implementation Council, or the body of (non-Bosnian) countries and agencies tasked with implementing Dayton. This is only to end when the country is deemed politically stable and “able to take full responsibility for its own affairs” (Office of the High Representative, 2015. para. 2). But today, the possibility of scrapping or remodelling Dayton remains a distant, even laughable, idea to many Bosnians; as I discuss further in chapter four, informants regularly predict a timeline spanning 50, 100, 200 or more years of waiting for change. Rather, the reality remains of an only nominally independent state whose highest leader is determined by the international community rather than by Bosnians themselves.

The labyrinthine nature of Bosnia’s geopolitical situation naturally confuses those not from Bosnia, as I have experienced myself when trying to explain it to friends and colleagues—even those from Bosnia’s neighboring countries. But as Stef Jansen has noted in his own ethnography, the obtuseness of the state structure puts off Bosnians, too. The statecraft of post-Dayton Bosnia hovers like a “confusing, muddled, and always incomplete mirage” behind all my informants’ stories and biographies (Jansen, 2015, p. 6). But, as Jansen notes, while the mirage is

ever-present, “no one [in his field site] had an organigram of Dayton BiH on the wall and no one consulted one before trying to sort out a pension, reporting a burglary, attempting to avoid a tax payment or applying for a building permit” (Jansen, 2015, p. 6). The inability to make sense of (and hence the inability to derive use or benefit out of) the state structure sits alongside its ultimate control by external powers as a reason for its mirage-like character. As I will elaborate in chapter one, the confounding state structure at the macro level reverberates incessantly in people’s lives on the ground; even its *lack* renders “intense” attachments and disappointments, making it impossible to ignore (Ahmed, 2004, p. 119).

I.b. Temporal – A deep history of crises

I will now offer an overview of Bosnia’s (and specifically Banja Luka’s) complex history, focusing on points of tension or crises that reverberate in the present day. As noted in the literature, Bosnians and non-Bosnians alike have come to see Bosnia as a critical meeting point of “East” and “West” (Bougarel et al., 2007; Helms, 2008). These imagined geographies, imbued with their concomitant signifiers of underdevelopment and development, regression and progression, find in Bosnia a “meeting point” due to Bosnia’s longstanding history of competing imperial rule (Said, 1977). In Milica Bakić-Hayden’s schematic of “nesting orientalisms”, Bosnia can be placed from the perspective of the Balkans as east of “Western Europe” and thus having inherently “violent” characteristics. But following a “nesting” logic, Bosnia can also incorporate this logic within, placing the eastern Balkans closer to a mythologized East and to an Ottoman past, thus fulfilling more extreme oriental stereotypes (Bakić-Hayden, 1995, p. 918). Within this schema, those who live in areas previously dominated by the Hapsburgs assume superiority to those from areas previously dominated by the Ottomans, while Orthodox peoples in the latter areas assume superiority still to the truly “oriental” Muslims with whom they share space. Bakić-Hayden’s theory is especially relevant to the Serb-dominated Banja Luka, as Serbs who “have not scored high on the hegemonic western scale” often affirm their own Europeanness by referring to their defense of European culture and Christianity against further westward Ottoman invasion (Bakić-Hayden, p. 924-925). Of course, as in previously mentioned cases of orientalism, these instances of stigmatization were largely interpellated by the Western gaze; as Bakić-Hayden notes, the western media recurrently referred to “ancient hatreds” as an explanation for the Bosnian war, thus “obscuring the modernity of conflict based on contested notions of state, nation, national identity and sovereignty” and conjuring images as explored by Maria Todorova

of the “primitive” Balkans (Bakić-Hayden, 1995, p. 929; Todorova, 1997). Such claims to the region by “East” and “West” and specifically with early Slavic peoples, Ottomans, and Austro-Hungarians perpetuated and sought to justify the 1990s war (Basic, G. & Delić, Z., 2024). In nationalist narratives across the former Yugoslavia, these historic claims still play a major role in post-war reconciliation—or the lack thereof. While a battle was never waged on Banjaluka soil, the forced displacement of many to and from the city and the generational trauma of the war weigh heavily on society. Across *Republika Srpska*, the dominant post-war policy is the supposed protection of the Serb population against external “enemies”: once, the Ottomans and their Bosniak descendents (which is of course a fantasy of ethnically clean bloodlines) and now also western imperialism. This resentment against the west solidified in NATO’s 1999 bombing of Serbia in retaliation against the ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians. As I will mention in chapter one, this event remains in the imaginary of present-day Banja Luka, where “*Ne u NATO*” (no to NATO) is graffitied at least once in each neighborhood, and the state holds tightly to the idea that any critique comes from an “other” bent on the destruction of the R.S. In the eyes of the prevailing state narrative and the media, the members of *Pravda za Davida* formed a perfect example of such an “other,” on which I will elaborate in chapter two.

1.c Recent history – the state as the new “other”

Many of my informants noted that their lived experience did not match up with the state-held narrative of perpetuating war-time victimhood that now necessitates protection against external “enemies.” Oftentimes in flashes of frustration against the corrupt R.S. state, even my most conservative informants would curse the prime minister, Milorad Dodik. I recall one such friend, a business owner, slamming her foot on the gas of her car with me in the passenger’s seat, saying “That’s it, I will leave Banja Luka, there is no point” after hearing about Dodik’s son extrapolating money from a new point of sale software required to be installed in all restaurants. Ordinarily a covid denier and a Putin loyalist, her patience with the Dodik administration started to wear thin, evolving instead into palpable anger.

This feeling represents part of a trend noted by my informants away from inter-ethnic blaming and towards anti-state resentment—particularly, resentment against corruption. The first example of this resentment boiling over into protest was the 2012 “*Park je naš*” or “the park is ours” movement. What began as an attempt to save green space from a construction project developed into a full-scale protest against the R.S. government. Banners read “End the tyranny of the criminal oligarchy!” as well as other reminders that the protests were not illegal, but rather

aiming to decrease the atmosphere of political fear (Jukić, 2012). In order to avoid such fear as well as the headache of the bureaucracy, protesters simply called themselves “walkers” so as not to be deemed demonstrators under the law. Still, the police extra-legally blocked the walkers from marching toward government building, although they never displayed violence. While these walkers did not ultimately save the park from being overrun by construction, they mobilized in numbers nearing 6,000, marking the largest post-Dayton protest by that time in Banja Luka (Dakić, 2014).

In 2014, a series of protests collectively deemed the “Bosnian Spring” swept the country, with the aim of exposing rampant corruption, unemployment and poverty. As in the case of the park protest, overall frustration with the post-Dayton state mobilized protesters’ response.

Demonstrations of hundreds of workers, seniors, war veterans, football hooligans, and the unemployed alike in Tuzla quickly grew to several parallel demonstrations across the Federation in Zenica, Bihać, Tešanj, Mostar, and Sarajevo, among other cities (Kurtović & Hromadžić, 2017). In Tuzla and Sarajevo alike, thousands of protesters marched, ultimately breaking into government buildings and even setting fire to police cars. Remarkably, in Tuzla, after violent clashes between protesters and police, police joined the protesters’ side, even removing their helmets in a show of support. Although joint protests in the R.S. were small and did not catch media attention, I recall a sense of solidarity and an electric sense of expectation among my friends in Banja Luka. The largest uprising since Dayton sought, as Kurtović and Hromadžić have put it, “to rearticulate grounds for collective agency through socio-economic rather than identitarian forms of solidarity,” thus recasting past narratives of inter-ethnic conflict into new narratives of the people versus the corrupt state, regardless of ethnic denomination (Kurtović & Hromadžić 2017, p.4).

II. Methodology and positionality: an ethnography of friendship

My ethnography of *Pravda za Davida* began in small ways in 2018 at the height of the protests, which I originally aimed to cover as a journalist. I spoke with Davor and other members of David’s family, and heard from friends who contacted me daily about the revolutionary energy sweeping Banja Luka. I traveled to Bosnia to attend the protests and undertook what I didn’t know at the time was an incipient participant observation, as I wondered how I could best assist a ground-breaking movement that was not mine to participate in, but whose story I knew needed to be told.

I returned to Bosnia for my fieldwork in the fall of 2019 after living there in 2013, 2014, and 2017, and was surprised after years in Budapest and Vienna to feel alien to Banja Luka. I woke up many mornings to a rooster crowing from the *veseli brdo*, “the cheery hill” next door, and began meeting people constituting the first group of my informants: my peers and friends. The decision to use friends as informants proved central both to my methodology and to my broader project. Spaces of intimacy and mutual vulnerability with friends informed my ethnography within the duration of project, as it did before and after it. My friend Sandra in particular has been part of my daily life, whether I am physically in Banja Luka or on the other end of a phone call, since I was just twenty-two years old. Beyond the knowledge she has shared with me of everything Bosnian, our relationship in itself has been vital to this project, involving at various times emotional, practical, financial, and emergency care that together gives lived experience to my theoretical attention to “love.”

This intimacy was also made possible by living for the first three months of my fieldwork with my friends Jelena and Duško, with whom I had countless meals and conversations reviewing daily life. Their flat in the neighborhood *Starčevica* provided comfort and safety, and its dramatic hilltop view from the balcony remains in my mind as the backdrop of much collective laughter and tears. This flat would become the space for discussions of *Pravda za Davida* and the state, in relation both to anxieties about Bosnia’s future and to my research anxieties. It would also become the space for deliberation regarding Jelena and Duško’s incipient embarkment on a Carnival cruise ship job in Florida and the Caribbean, Jelena’s seasonal work as a nanny in Vienna, and the pair’s ultimate decision to leave Banja Luka for a new life in Vienna.

Jelena, Duško, and Sandra, now friends of mine for more than ten years, served as co-informants who played an integral role in my ethnography by fixing connections with further informants and providing a view into their lifeworld that cannot be seen in public space. In place of the dramaturgical or exhibitionist self seen in public spaces, the self exposed in interaction with close friends provided an intimate view of an array of emotions spurred by the political realities of living under the Bosnian state (Hogan, 2010). Beyond Jelena, Duško, and Sandra, I focused on other friends that I have known for years before the beginning of this fieldwork (between 2013 and 2019), or friends that I made during these three years of fieldwork (between 2020 and 2022). As I will explain further in this section, the process of maintaining and creating these friendships took on a sense of mutuality that gave the project depth and authenticity.

Despite the drawbacks of focusing heavily on a smaller group, i.e., less broad data, the decision to do ethnography with friends granted me a much deeper perspective, eventually influencing the

research's overarching theme as much as its ethnographic practice. Moreover, working with a smaller number of informants granted me the opportunity to favor "case-" over "sample-based" or "statistical" logic; as Mario Luis Small has elaborated, by using this method, I sequentially took each case as operating under its *own* set of questions, thus accessing "processes unknown before the start of the study" (Small, M.L., 2009, 25). In each new interview in the "sequence," for example, I refined my questions anew as I re-evaluated my understanding of what it is I am seeking, thus finetuning my case until "saturation" was reached (Small, M.L., 2009, 28).

Friendship was also instrumental in helping me to overcome some of the biases that accompany my positionality as a U.S. American entering a space skeptical of western influence and traumatized by the 1999 NATO bombing of Belgrade and Novi Sad. While Banja Luka is a place in which I always felt safe—in contrary to the shock of many friends in other cities who raised eyebrows at my choice of a research site—it is also a place where I was sometimes met as an Other who had to prove that I was not in Banja Luka to reproduce American ideology. Among all of my identifying markers, my Americanness certainly underlied each of my interactions, and I remained conscious that my ethnographic representations were not only "partial truths," but "positioned truths," informed as much by my informants' perception of me and my nationality as by my perception of them (Lughod, A., 1991, p. 53). Moreover, I remained aware of the "historical processes by which it came to pass" that I found myself in Banja Luka—after teaching English in Sarajevo in 2011 and 2013 through my American university, I received a Fulbright grant to teach English under the auspices of the U.S. Embassy branch office in Banja Luka (Lughod, A., p. 57). Thus, if we take this as my first entry point into the field, the entry is marked by the cultural imperialism of the Fulbright English teaching project. While I was always genuinely welcomed, and found in that project the first chance to live long-term in Banja Luka, the socio-historical realities of U.S.-Republika Srpska relations cannot be denied. Today, the branch office in Banja Luka is still surrounded by an unscalable wall topped with barbed wire, reflecting instances in the past in which the building was assaulted.

Indeed, the process of gaining a certain level of familiarity with life in Banja Luka and even beginning to consider it a sort of "home" of my own would not have been possible without real, mutually constituted, and vulnerable friendships. As Lisa Tillman-Healy has noted, unlike family, friendship is not something we are born into, but is always chosen and reconstituted. Even marriage, limited by its "religious and legal grounding," lacks the constant negotiability of friendship, which has the power to "form, reinforce, and alter conceptions of self" (Tillmann-Healy, L., 2015, p. 2). Furthermore, the lines between friendship and fieldwork easily blur; whether in friendship or fieldwork communities, "we must gain entrée," and from there, shift

into the various roles that each community demands—“advocate,” “confidante,” “student,” and countless more, under the flexible definitions of both endeavors (Tillmann-Healy, L., 2015, p. 3). It would certainly not have been possible without these friendships to call Banja Luka a “home” and a place that I would eventually feel a deep commitment to writing about. As I theoretically reflect on the significance of “love” in the thesis, I feel compelled to note that its methodology always comprised “a labor of love”—an emotional labor I felt compelled to fulfil during and long prior to my fieldwork (Hromadžić 2024 p. 2).

Part of this “entrée” in my case necessitated my acquisition of the BCS (Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian) language, which I learned under Sandra for many years—throughout my fieldwork period, and now. Knowing the language proved vital to accessing groups beyond those familiar with English, including several of the “*Pravdaši*”—the name that the remaining *Pravda* activists gave to themselves—and importantly, people of varying education levels and access to international networks. Importantly, knowing the language allowed me to pay greater attention to spontaneous data from everyday life, and hence, to a broader arena of political opinion than that of my close friends. This was especially true in “third spaces” such as cafes, bars, clubs, and even my gym, where I would befriend many people outside of the *Pravda za Davida* and activist circles (Oldenburg, 1989). It is worth noting that many of those I regarded as mere acquaintances eventually became friends, as we inevitably reproduced the themes of care and love so central to my project as our relationships evolved.

The sensitive nature of my research topic increased my need for informants whom I trusted, and who trusted me. I often found myself in an ambivalent position wherein I could not always reference *Pravda* directly, and had to adjust my narrative to each interaction. Not only was I a U.S. American automatically associated by some in Banja Luka with NATO, but also a student of CEU whose research was funded by George Soros—a figure loathed in the dominant Serb narrative of victimhood at the hands of the west.² As experienced by several journalists, academics, diplomats and the *Pravda* activists themselves, I started to be seen as a “*špijun*” or spy. While this accusation was usually said as a joke and imbued with self-aware reference to the rhetoric of the ruling party, I heard it on an almost daily basis. The position of the anthropologist is more vulnerable to this accusation even than diplomats, as a long-term ethnography can be vague and slippery to define. Most people I met in Banja Luka paused after my explanation and

² This trend only grows in recent years, as pro-Russian sentiment in Republika Srpska inspires support for Putin after the invasion of Ukraine, and general trends towards authoritarianism become intertwined with nationalist victim narratives. In April 2024, R.S. president Milorad Dodik proposed a law on what he called “foreign agents” which aims to limit non-profit organizations financed by external countries.

said, “So, do you have a job?” This evasion of definition entrenched the possibility of being a spy even further. At times, my ability to speak Serbian was even seen as a mark that I had been specially trained to fit in. Similarly, the fact that I lacked familial connections to the diaspora, and even lacked ancestry from the former Yugoslavia, was often met with shock, casting me again into the role of a potential spy.

The irony was that, while I was seen as a spy or “surveillant,” I myself felt the spectre of surveillance. This fear of surveillance stemmed from the fates of journalists who tried to cover *Pravda* on the day of the biggest clash between police and protesters and were held in questioning by the police. I experienced this loosely throughout my fieldwork as the “odd American,” which resulted in a long running joke with my close friend Suzana about how I would rather be a spy for the Serbs than for the Americans. Thus, the status of being a “*špijun*” or spy—and an anthropologist—sometimes benefitted from its vagueness, allowing me to connect through ambivalence and humor even as I felt fear.³

Especially during the creation of my visa, this fear of surveillance kept me in a constant state of anxiety (and gave me insight into a fraction of what the *Pravdaši* felt as Bosnian citizens opposing the state) although the dangers were always unclear. Sometimes, friends like my neighbor Milan T. would warn me that the government received methods of extracting data from none other than my native U.S., causing me to view my Facebook messages with paranoia. Other times, the state of Bosnia and especially of *Republika Srpska* was cast in daily banter as a joke; as one internet meme showed in parallel with a “western” surveillance system of cameras, the Balkan surveillance system was a *baba* or grandma leaning out of her towering post-socialist flat window with a cigarette, gathering intel on passersby. And on yet a different day, friends might point out to me that the cameras that lined government buildings, street corners, and parks were not there when I lived in Banja Luka in 2013.

After several friends informed me that it would never work to make papers with the university with a topic like mine, I spent my first months in Banja Luka in a kind of desperation, relying heavily on *veze* (connections) to see who might sponsor me. The jokes began on the absolute irony of an American striving to stay in Bosnia, while everyone else was trying to leave. Having been loudly threatened with a ten-year block from entering Bosnia years before at the visa office when my record showed that I failed to pay for the obligatory “white card” (address registry), I wasn’t sure whether to believe them. I saw that, even when regarded as a joke or failure, the

³ See Katherine Verdery’s book *My Life as a Spy* about the Romanian secret police’s surveillance file on her case, and on how fieldwork and spying can become confused (Verdery, 2018).

state still holds a powerful sway in the realm of the imagination, a ghostly concept that haunts those who seek to protect it or evade it (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 400).

I brainstormed in cafes with Jelena and Duško, as we called everyone we knew to see how we can wade through the *papirologija*—a term for paper-chasing born out of the regularity of such bureaucratic battles. Eventually, my friend Stefan agreed to make papers through his IT company. As someone himself frustrated with the state and having lived at various times abroad (which I will expand upon in chapter five), he supported my research. His promise to help me was not an empty one; as I have alluded to previously, my friends in Banja Luka displayed a willingness to go to great lengths to help me, even through the hell of bureaucracy.

Once after my visa officer called us to warn us that we were late—there was no time, and there would be no extension—we rushed to the foreigners’ office. I crumbled while Stefan stayed cool in his characteristically hustler fashion, and while I tried to follow his demeanor, I ultimately piped up: “That’s it, I am flying too close to the sun, it will never work.” This statement of anguish would become a regular joke among our friends met with guffaws about how I could possibly see living in Bosnia as the “sun” towards which to fly.

When we realized that one document was stuck in the postal system after Stefan failed to sign for it—and somewhere en route between the postal office and Stefan’s house—we went on an expedition to find the van at the postal office, only to be met by a clerk who informed us that all we could do was come back at 7:00 p.m. once the van had finished its rounds and see if the document had been returned. We drove back to my visa officer Svjetlana’s office, where I cowered and Stefan stood aloof. “Please sit,” said Svjetlana. While I acquiesced, Stefan shrugged and said “Eh, I am tired of sitting today, this is fine.” Perturbed, Svjetlana glanced back and forth at us, and begrudgingly gave us until the morning to submit the elusive document.

By the grace of whatever god of *papirologija*, my document was at the post office that evening. Still, I arrived at the visa office clutching a box of chocolates—some obsequious gesture of Balkan gift-giving that I clung to as a (rather feeble) trump card—the next day at the break of dawn. Svjetlana casually strolled up the staircase some hours later, looked me over, and told me to come inside her office. After awkwardly showing her the chocolates, unsure how to make such a bribe, or even if it was one, her eyes met mine.

“Dana...you Americans are so funny. Do you know the old cartoon, what’s his name, porky pig? Once he tried to escape from an island on a canoe, and the savages are flinging arrows at him.

But he puts up an American flag and it blocks all of the arrows. Don't you see that that's what you are? You Americans are always nervous, and for what?"

She broke out in laughter, and switched her tone abruptly from the deportation-threatening phone calls of the previous weeks. "You know, I really need to work on my English...I have to work so much here, and for what? I want to make something of my life, to move up." She had shifted from her performance as a representative of the state to someone struggling with the same existential question as my interlocutors—whether to stay or to emigrate from Bosnia.

The anxieties inherent in this process mirror anxieties about surveillance that I experienced throughout the fieldwork. Although fearful at times, I tried to use this vulnerability as a strength rather than a weakness, and through it, to constitute many mutually beneficial friendships (beyond the core friendships with Sandra, Duško and Jelena) that became core to my research. My visa process delayed my foray into the community of *Pravda* activists, whom, as I will explain further in chapter three, were subjected to jailtime, fines, and lack of access to employment because of their involvement in anti-state activities. As I have explained in the above vignette, the frictions I had experienced at the immigration office left me in a paranoid state, wondering if I would already be on some kind of list. While it is very important to note that I was not subject to the same punishment as a Bosnian citizen engaging in the same form of activism, I would describe my methodology as "activist anthropology," as I actively took part in the social movement and furthered its aims (Kirsch, 2018). Still, my principal methodology remained centered around friendship; it was the informal moments and spaces of vulnerability that contributed to my study as much as conspicuous protest.

While anxieties characterized my position within the larger society and in the eyes of the state, my ethnographic work with the *Pravdaši* was inclusive to say the least. Because the *Pravda* movement incorporated people from various ethnic groups from within Bosnia and other states of the former Yugoslavia and the diaspora, as well as international participants, it was not difficult to become part of their group. Although they felt disappointment in the lack of any meaningful help from western embassies and the European Union in their fight for justice, this manifested as a universal skepticism towards institutions in general rather than, as in the view of the state, a need to protect an in-group (Bosnian Serbs) from an out-group (the "spies"). Thus, I stood alongside the *Pravdaši* in several protests within Banja Luka including the daily "protest" or ritual on the town square, the commemoration of David's birthday, campaigning for the groups' political party, traveling with them to a larger scale protest in Sarajevo, and the annual "international conferences" the group held for the media in Banja Luka.

Participant observation was a vital method, first of all as a form of the aforementioned “activist” or “engaged” anthropology that often arises in field sites experiencing war, terrorism, human rights, or violence (Low & Merry, 2010; Kirsch, 2018). Against an extractive approach to the activists’ time and labor, I did what I could to assist the movement while avoiding surveillance and fines; in the end, this took the form of emotional support and in-person participation in events, although I unfortunately felt restricted in publicizing the groups’ aims, for instance on social media, out of a fear of surveillance. I strove for an “anti-imperialist political stance” as a researcher, privileging collaboration and awareness of my positionality—especially in terms of the far milder consequences awaiting me, a U.S. citizen, should something go wrong (Low & Merry, 2010).

This approach allowed me to witness several “in-between” moments during coffees and strategy meetings, in which I was exposed to information hidden from the groups’ public face, including frictions and anxieties but also moments of sincere care and understanding between people who were either venerated or criticized—but always to a degree ostracized—from the broader community. While much of my narration and quotes stem from natural conversations amongst friends, I also conducted several semi-structured interviews with the activists in which I gained insight into the movement’s inception which occurred before my fieldwork, and into activists’ motivation to remain with the group despite the sacrifices it entails. These semi-structured interviews, at times teetering on unstructured interviews, allowed the interviewee to guide the conversation towards their most emotionally pressing topics, and produced high validity, while of course bearing the cost of making cross-comparison between their answers less clear (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

Both in informal conversations and semi-structured interviews, I strove for an emotionally vulnerable attitude and a directness about my position as a researcher, even about insecurities in my work. Keeping in mind that many of the *Pravdaši* had a close relationship with David and his family—or are his family—I was aware that observation of any kind might not be looked upon kindly. Moreover, it could rob them of the sense of safety prerequisite for mourning. Aware of the highly vulnerable and highly emotional position of the community of the *Pravdaši*, I mirrored them with my own vulnerabilities, basing my ethnography on care, love, mutuality, and friendship.

Returning to my previous discussion of the interplay between friendship and fieldwork, I strove in my relationships with the *Pravdaši* and others for “friendship as method,” and beyond this, an

“ethics” of friendship (Tillman-Healy, L., 2015, p. 6). As Tillmann-Healy notes regarding this approach,

“although we employ traditional forms of data gathering (e.g., participant observation, systematic note-taking, and informal and formal interviewing), our primary procedures are those we use to build and sustain friendship: conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, generosity, and vulnerability...perhaps the most important aspect of this methodology is that we research with an ethic of friendship, a stance of hope, caring, justice, even love. Friendship as method is neither a program nor a guise strategically aimed at gaining further access. It is a level of investment in participants’ lives that puts fieldwork relationships on par with the project...When asked, we keep secrets, even if they would add compelling twists to our research report or narrative. We consider our participants an audience and struggle to write both honestly and empathically for them. lii We lay ourselves on the line, going virtually anywhere, doing almost anything, pushing to the furthest reaches of our being. We never ask more of participants than we are willing to give. Friendship as method demands radical reciprocity, a move from studying ‘them’ to studying us” (Tillman-Healy, L., 2015, p. 6, pp. 8-9).

Especially with the *Pravdaši*, who were both politically and existentially vulnerable despite their bravery, I took into account what was meant to be shared and what was meant to be kept confidential during my interviews. Moreover, I stayed attuned to our mutually constituted emotional lives, regarding them indeed as my friends, and not mere “objects” of study. Following Ruth Behar’s note that “observers in the social sciences have not yet learned how to make the most of their own emotional involvement with their material,” I stayed attuned to my own emotional state, seeing in myself fragments of the pain and fear felt by activist informants, and the “stuckedness” of my friends unsure of their futures (Behar, 1996, p. 6; Hage, 2009, para. 1) albeit tempered always by my positionality as the one who could easily leave. Behar’s question of “just how public an activity is the work of the anthropologist” loomed even as I wrote fieldnotes and later, my dissertation:

“Our field notes become palimpsests, useless unless plumbed for forgotten revelatory moments, unexpressed longings, and the wounds of regret. And so, even though we start by going public, we continue our labor through introspection” (Behar, 1996, p. 9).

My relationship with the *Pravdaši*, and with other communities in Banja Luka, continues through the introspection and labor of writing and through interdependent relationships, especially with Sandra, Jelena and Duško, who emotionally and materially give me a home base in my relocated

life in Europe. The safety and anonymity of all included in the thesis are guarded by using changed names where requested, and by seeking permission to include stories that might implicate informants' reputation. Notably, it was always the *Pravda* activists, "guilty" of the riskiest activities and espousing the rawest anti-state opinions, who desired their real names to be used. They had faced the state head on and knew more than anyone the real risks it posed, and the lies that it told only to sustain fear.

III. Contextualizing the thesis

My work is informed by a longstanding body of anthropological and sociological work on the region. Beyond Bosnia, my broader understanding of the region and of postwar statehood was also informed by the work of Eric Gordy, whose work on Serbian nationalism has important ramifications for *Republika Srpska* and its construction, and Jessica Greenberg, whose ethnography of youth protests in Serbia touches on the interplay of hope and disappointment that I witnessed among the *Pravda* activists (Gordy, 2013; Greenburg, 2014).

My work is especially informed by current debates on Bosnia in the post-socialist context, specifically regarding processes of social change and imagined futures. Elissa Helms' early work on womens' NGOs in Sarajevo and Zenica, and particularly her understanding of Bosnia's imagined geographies between east and west have underlied my approach since my master's fieldwork (Helms, 2013). I am especially indebted to her methodological example; I strove to follow her example as an outsider and an American working with Bosnian interlocutors. Her discussions of Bosnians' defining of "the political" as immoral have had particular bearing on my study (Helms, 2008b). My discussion of *narod*—"nation" or "the people"—as a category beyond ethnic belonging has been particularly influenced by Azra Hromadžić and Torsten Kolind, and can be traced to early discussions in the literature in the work of Tone Bringa, whose definition of the "nation" in Bosnia resisted Western frameworks (Hromadžić, 2015; Kolind, 2008; Bringa, 1993). On unrest and civic engagement in Bosnia in recent decades specifically, Larisa Kurtović and Azra Hromadžić have commented and departed from an ethnonationalist frame and towards a critique of the state across ethnic lines (Kurtović & Hromadžić, 2017; Hromadžić, 2015). Similarly, Danijela Majstorović's work on the *Pravda* movement has offered insight into its broader ramifications for corruption and brain drain across the country and the region (Majstorović, 2021). Her deeply interpersonal approach to *Pravda* activists in Banja Luka inspired

my methodologies, and her emic perspective as a Banjalukan provided a perspective on the movement that my work cannot.

Chapter three was predominantly informed by Čarna Brković's study of the role of favors and clientelism in Bosnia, particularly her conceptualization of "social personhood," or, the notion that favors persist because they help define who people are socially; they are *chosen*, not only because they arise as the sole means of getting things done within broken systems. Stef Jansen's work on the region similarly resists "balkanizing" frameworks by centering his informants' agency and describing their choices as rational responses to their social world. I draw from and apply to Banja Luka Jansen's findings on hope, temporalities, and home and homemaking.

Lastly, I must articulate how my ethnographic and interpretive approach seek to mirror the contemporary work of Azra Hromadžić in *Riverine Citizenship: A Bosnian City in Love with the River* (Hromadžić 2024). Through the case of the 2015 protest in the city of Bihać against the construction of a dam on the Una river, Hromadžić comes to define citizenship outside of its typical, formal understandings as inherently linked to the state. As a means of redefining politics, political belonging and even space, she expands citizenship to include "numerous people's everyday realities, engagements, and actions in a relationally understood world" (Hromadžić 2024, p. 3). Drawing from the areligious—yet still signifying omniscience in everyday sociality—"worship" of the Una river, she coins "riverine citizenship": citizenship that, like the river itself, is local, primordial, and deeply embodied rather than territorial. Importantly, her concept of riverine citizenship parallels my analysis which separates love of city, country, space, and identity from a nationalist love of nation; as she puts it, riverine citizenship can be "nationalism's opposite," predicated on inclusion rather than exclusion (Hromadžić 2024, p. 8). Place-based attachment—as I explore later in chapter two as a key element of protest and in chapter four as living on in the experiences of Banjalukans in the diaspora—can even be progressive or desirable when a sense of duty to the local "give[s] rise to non-exclusive ethics of care" (Kovács 2021, p. 14, as cited in Hromadžić 2024). As Hromadžić made the river an ethnographic subject around which a swirl of affective engagements emerge, my work at times renders the city of Banja Luka itself a subject that conjures love (and hate)—a subject and a place met with conflicting emotions, yet always talked about. Similarly, as explored in chapter two, David haunts the town's central square, the creek where his body was found, and the consciousness of many in Banja Luka—and perhaps himself serves like the preservation of the Una as a subject of mystery, nostalgia, desire, home, and belonging.

It is my hope that this thesis contributes another example of Hromadžić's riverine approach, and in so doing continues recent traditions of analyzing post-war and post-socialist Bosnia from an agency-based lens. Its contribution to Bosnian anthropology will also be geographic in nature, as it represents the first in-depth exploration of Banja Luka as a field site—a site well worth exploring in itself, but also one that has significant ramifications for Bosnia and the region, given its politically controversial nature, its connection to Serb nationalism, and at the same time, its peoples' ability to critique and resist such issues all the more for their proximity to them. Theoretical contributions will include an analysis of resistance and social movements through the lens of affect in times both of hope and doubt; of how this affect drives the creation of close relations that in themselves resist the regime; and of how people come to rely on one another rather than on neglectful state institutions, thus fostering relations of friendship, care, and love.

IV Theoretical underpinnings

While "the bridge" as defined through Maria Todorova's conjuring of Nietzsche, as I will later expound upon in chapter one, provides an overarching metaphor, several theories of affect and of the state underlie my approach. I will provide a brief genealogy of these theories and explain the importance of uniting the fields in anticipation of the more case-driven chapters that follow. Lastly, I will explain how love, famously difficult to define—and it turns out, difficult to theorize—plays a major role in the analysis of my cases.

IV.1 Affect, emotion, and the body

In my analysis of Banjalukans' ways of coping with a bridge-like existence, I am drawn to informants' embodied experiences of politics; affective responses illustrate frustrations with the state (as in the intensely emotional reactions to David's murder) beyond the discursive. In choosing the word "affect," I signal my desire to paint what is beyond the spoken. I acknowledge that this has been a practice in ethnography prior to the emergence of affect theory, and that my attention (empirically and analytically) to feelings may be described either as a focus on *affect*, or more generally as a focus on *emotion*. However, I will offer here a brief history of affect theory in order to show its potential for handling emotionally intense cases—and more importantly, showing how affect can link bodies and emotions, usually seen as individual, to the social.

Marcel Mauss set social analysis of the body into motion in his "Techniques of the Body" by acknowledging that previous attempts to analyze quotidian acts such as swimming, caring for a child, walking, etc. were relegated to the category of "miscellaneous" rather than given their own

theories and methods of inquiry (Mauss, 1934 p. 50-51). Positing that “the body is man’s first and most natural instrument,” Mauss’ incipient work sets the stage for why I was drawn to informants’ embodied experiences of politics. However, I move beyond Mauss’ initial embodied turn, wherein he tends to too confidently read body movements as essential characteristics of a given gender, ethnicity, etc.

Foucault extrapolates Mauss’ concept of body techniques, making a movement away from assumptions of “given” techniques and towards a concern for how power shapes them. Within the context of my research, this applies both to the disciplining of *Republika Srpska* citizens in nationalist ideology and to their agency to assess and resist such domination. This allows for an embodied study that asks “to what extent historical processes were involved in what might seem to be the purely biological base of existence” and that assumes the body in a political field in which power relations “invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Foucault 2012, 173). Although my inquiry is not necessarily concerned with systems of incarceration, the state emerges as the entity that, through the failure to penalize David’s suspected murderers, revealed its interest in disciplining those who threaten its status, and its fear of legal and civil protest.

More contemporary considerations include the affective turn in anthropology, the benefits and drawbacks of which are debated. The proposition of affective forces from the social and material world, as well as our affective force upon them, derive, much earlier, from the intellectual tradition of Spinoza, whose complex treatise Michael Hardt nicely summarizes: “The perspective of the affects requires us constantly to pose as a problem the relation between actions and passions, between reason and the emotions” (Hardt, 2007, p. ix). Hardt also argues persuasively that studies of affective labor are necessary to grasp new aspects of many of today’s fields of production, i.e., sex workers, service industry workers, unwaged economies of kin work; the interrelations between rapidly changing technologies and the body; and the effects of trauma in the fields of immigration and war (Hardt, 2007, p. xi-xii). Trauma is especially significant in my spatio-temporal field, as the memory of violence is inherent even in the construction of the state of Republika Srpska. As Patricia Clough and Brian Massumi have argued, contemporary critical theory faces new “analytic challenges of ongoing war, trauma, torture, massacre, and counter/terrorism” that may best be addressed through non-linear philosophies that resist the trivialization of emotions, i.e. those of Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari, and Bergson (Clough, 2007, p. 1-2).

Thus, trauma, and with it, crisis, emerge as subfields within my broader application of affect. Judith Butler, in addition to her seminal work on embodiment in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, elaborates on the relation of the body to state violence in *Frames of War*, especially in the case of groups of people whose lives and deaths can be rationalized as null via processes of unemployment, incarceration, or as applies in the case of David, narratives of drug usage or gang membership (Butler, 2011, 2011a, 2009). Butler's conception of who is "grievable" or not also applies to state media portrayals of Pravda za Davida activists as disloyal to the Serb nation due to seeking assistance from "Western" networks and institutions. To understand the shifting genealogy of "trauma" from the psychiatric-psychological to a concept embedded in power relations, it is also helpful to turn to Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman's work in *The Empire of Trauma*. As Fassin and Rechtman explain, moral genealogies that run parallel to their scientific counterparts render trauma narratives (such as those written by the state) tools to "legitimize or exclude, compensate or condemn," and thus to create hierarchies of something as intimate as suffering (Fassin and Rechtman, 2009, p. 30).

I especially align my work with the approach of Sara Ahmed, which I have utilized to consider the extent to which affective experiences of state-driven or protest cultures have the "stickiness" to reflect changes in Banja Luka's political landscape—a landscape informants have often described as unresponsive even to mass resentment (Ahmed, 2009, p.130). Ahmed's work thus becomes seminal in explaining how affective encounters in Banja Luka can be rendered social beyond the limits of the personal-psychological, especially in cases where that affective encounter is marked by extreme emotion, i.e. the grief of David's father and of those assembling in protest. Ahmed's emphasis upon emotions that *do things* socially (via movement and vulnerable encounters) provides a framework for exploring how the "stickiness" of David's father and the protesters' grief operates in public space.

IV.2 The state

The statecraft of Banja Luka would be central to any inquiry into its culture, whether that inquiry had a stated "political" bent or not. The "bridge-like existence" that Maria Todorova defines as the Balkans' position between hegemony of empire, religion, ethnicity, and development regimes, and in a temporal (i.e., narratives of "transition" from socialism to an unending state of "post" socialism) suspension, cannot but be political (see further extrapolation of the bridge-like existence in chapter one). As I have stated earlier, this inherent politicization may be especially true for Banja Luka; as one friend from Macedonia recently said, reflecting upon my project,

“You can understand all of the Balkans and still have no idea how to explain what is Banja Luka.” An exemplar of the double-edged sword of hybridity, at once precarious and creative by eluding definition, the capital of the pseudo-state of Republika Srpska fosters a social environment in which individual bodies emerge as sites of contestation, more vulnerable to discipline by insecure governmentality resting on nationalist narratives, and more emboldened to seek recognition (Bhabha 1997).

Thus, my inquiry into the state finds its genealogy in Foucault’s attention to the body, just as in the genealogy of affect I outlined in section II. Although the state exists in many imaginaries as omnipresent yet disconnected from intimate life, Foucault is among the first to specifically delineate the connection. In his *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes of the body entering a political economy, not only through physical violence, but also through so-called “lenient” methods of confinement and, even further, through the everyday mechanisms of “individuals, bodies, gestures, and behavior” (Foucault, 2012, p. 174). My research places Banjalukans’ imaginaries of the state within such a framework, drawing on Foucault not only to reference the state’s institutional spaces, but also to focus on state narratives that influence the most quotidian expectations or disappointments. In Foucault’s words, the aim would be “a meticulous observation of detail and, at the same time, a political awareness of these small things, for the control and use of men” (Foucault, 2012, p. 185).

In more contemporary social theory on the state, studies on sovereignty by such scholars as Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat discuss how even in studies of international relations and globalization, power, sovereignty, and territory continue to play a crucial role, so much so that “sovereignty cannot be imagined independently of the state” (Hansen and Stepputat 2005, p. 2). The case of Banja Luka, situated in the post-Dayton Accords state of Bosnia and Herzegovina and beyond that, in the pseudo-state of Republika Srpska, illustrates the Hegelian notion that sovereignty can only be recognized when “local and familial solidarities of ‘civil society’ are sublimated to expressions of patriotism through the state, particularly in situations of crisis” (Hansen and Stepputat, 2005, p. 2). In this sense (based on Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*), “sovereignty is not the bedrock of state power but a precarious effect—and an objective—of state formation” (Hansen and Stepputat, 2005, p. 2; Hegel, 1967). Hansen and Stepputat suggest that sovereign power and the violence “that always[s]” marks it” must be taken as processes occurring throughout society. This makes an important movement from earlier concepts of the state that assumed states’ de facto legitimacy, and a similarity in interests and patterns across drastically different states.

While in some disciplines, sovereignty automatically references the sovereignty of the modern state, anthropology extends the concept of the sovereign beyond the state in tandem with its expansive concept of power. I align my work especially with constructivist political theory and performance studies within anthropology, both of which produce ethnographies of the “making of ‘stateness’” (Bryant, 2016). Such performances may be “spectacular and public, secret and menacing” or “as scientific/technical rationalities of management and punishment of bodies” (Hansen and Stepputat, 2005, p. 3). Hansen and Stepputat also note that such performances are only effective when reiterated over and over; taking the historical case of absolutist monarchs, they explain that it was only through repeated and ritualized killing of criminals or enemies of state that sovereignty was corroborated.

The modern state—and especially the insecure pseudo state of *Republika Srpska*—seeks legitimacy in part through such ritualized performances of Serbian nationalism, the resistance to which may be seen in artworks or even popular music that comprise a sort of counter-performance. Such counter-performances are further articulated by Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who regard collective performances of singing as an “articulation of plurality,” specifically citing a 2006 demonstration against the discrimination of immigrants in Los Angeles wherein demonstrators sang the U.S. anthem in Spanish (Butler and Spivak, 2006, 59). The problem of plurality and of who comprises “we” within the anthem is subverted by this discursive act; I argue that the singing of David’s song similarly restages the street, constituting firstly a refusal to accept the state’s actions and secondly to broadcast the affective repercussions of those actions in the most visible public square of the city.

IV.3 Love and the intertwining of affect and the state: What is affective resistance?

It is my hope that employing the distinct fields of anthropology of affect and anthropology of the state will contribute a necessary perspective for analyzing the unique spatio-temporal city of Banja Luka, wherein political relations very much dominate intimate life. This intersection of the anthropology of the state and affective explorations of space has been employed to analyze spaces marked by trauma and insecure states like *Republika Srpska*, for instance in Yael Navaro-Yashin’s writing on “governance as sensorial” in northern Cyprus, a region with similar precarity as *Republika Srpska*, she demonstrates the challenge but also the ethnographic potential of affect (Navaro-Yashin, 2012). Thus, she shares my concern for how influential thinkers in affect

studies such as Patricia Clough and Sara Ahmed might bring evidence to their claims and avoid assumptions when operating “beyond discourse.”

In addition to increased ethnographic attention to affect and emotion associated with state violence, I have also been impressed with the call of Mateusz Laszczkowski and Madeleine Reeves to consider bottom-up approaches that complexify the discussions of sovereignty made by Hansen and Stepputat. The state, for informants, may also be “the object of emotional investment—a site of fear, paranoia or mutual suspicion...of desire for political recognition and political participation...or perhaps just of hope for order and a ‘normal’ life” (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2018, p. 3).

Michael Taussig’s *The Nervous System and The Magic of the State* also provide excellent contemporary examples of the potency of interrelating considerations of emotion and desire with the concept of the state (Taussig, 1992, 1997). Taussig seeks radical criticality in the field of bio/necropolitics, asserting that the Agambian state of exception may not be an exception at all, but simply something that those in power want citizens to believe so as not to be aware of everyday injustices (Agamben, 2004). His concept of the “nervous system” makes a fascinating nod to the body politic—but to one that is sick, fragile, and machine-like more than soulful (Taussig, 1992). More than semantic, this metaphor in itself nods to the meeting place between power relations and bodily-sensorial experience that I seek to illuminate.

The posthumous essays of Bergona Aretxaga on gendered politics in northern Ireland and the Basque region especially arrive at a similar nexus to my study of body, violence, and state. As Joseba Zulaika writes in the prologue to the essay collection *States of Terror*, Aretxaga transcended Anderson’s widely known concept of the “imagined community” to create a Lacanian take on the political *imaginary*. She argued that “the complex dynamic of identifications, projections, and fantasies, central to understanding the affective bonds that constitute nationalism as well as the state,” required such a notion (Zulaika, 2005, p. 12). Through this lens, she produced discursive and ethnographic studies on political fantasies such as a Spanish state terror method called “dirty war” under which right-wing militia enacted state terrorism (murder of journalists, trade unionists, writers, etc.) that ultimately succeeded in manipulating such “ghostly” concepts of “state” and “terrorism” into fetishes rather than concepts to be feared (Zulaika, p. 13-14). Aretxaga’s “Maddening States” similarly explores the effects of state power on territories and bodies, and, in alignment with Hansen and Stepputat, maintains that the state has a “crucial presence” even in an era of unbounded transnational organizations (Aretxaga, p. 393).

These works provide inspiration for my analysis of *Pravda za Davida*, corruption, and the question of emigration through the broader frames of affect and the state. I will conclude this chapter by suggesting that “love,” often written about in other related terms such as solidarity, may be a more potent way to describe the recognition of oneself in another, or, of one informant in another or in his or her community (Killick and Desai, 2010; Bell and Coleman 2020). In a bridge-like existence, love emerges as an answer especially to irrational or unanswerable questions: Why fight for *Pravda za Davida* when threats to one’s livelihood loom always in the background? Why engage in unsanctioned practices outside of the bureaucratic? And why stay in Bosnia when living conditions are not stable? Love implies multisided and contradictory emotion, and emerges everywhere in my ethnography as Banjalukans manage existential questions of how to resist, how to function in dysfunction, and whether to give the bridge-like existence up altogether. Importantly, my attention to love as a category came from my informants themselves, especially the *Pravda* activists, who time and time again used “love” in place of other moral categories. David’s tombstone itself reads “*Kroz smrt životom, kroz mržnju ljubavlju*” or “through death with life, through hate with love,” pointing to love rather than kindness alone as an antidote. Slavoj Žižek has commented on love’s power residing in its irrationality:

“Freedom is never a conclusive state, [where one can think] ‘now I am free.’ Freedom is the very eternal doubt, ‘Am I free?’ And I think it’s the same with love. The moment you don’t doubt your love, the moment you think you know why you are in love, it’s finished...in English and in French and in some other languages the verb, a very correct one, which uses ‘to *fall* in love.’ And one should give to the verb all of this radicality. You go, and all of a sudden, boom! You fall.” (Žižek, 2023).

In this definition then, love cannot be fully defined and certainly not extrapolated as a theory, as this would negate it. While Žižek speaks here of romantic love, he has clarified in other interviews that love may be social and communal (agape) or romantic and erotic (eros) (Žižek, 2021). While making a harsh critique of romantic love, he also finds fault with the former, and above all critiques contemporary society’s attempts to delineate between the two (Žižek, 2021). Thus, I use “love” in my work for aromantic cases and friendship, while signifying the “fall” inherent in Žižek’s romantic definition. I posit that, in relation to the cases in this thesis, one could “fall” in love with a protest (*Pravda*) or a country (Bosnia) in a sense that is all the more legitimate because it defies reason. It is my hope that the concept of love adds to the pre-existing concepts of affect and the state to better elucidate my study of life on the bridge, which itself requires some comfort in the irrational.

As is clear from my title, I have privileged the concept of “love” and placed it alongside what I call “affective resistance.” I use affect to conjure Ahmed’s definition of emotions as *actions* with political potential; while colloquial terms related to affect such as emotion or feeling are sometimes used, I ultimately choose affect to highlight the “economies” of feeling that bind my informants to their beliefs, ways of being, and to one another. Following James Scott, I seek to shift the definition of “resistance” from “formal, overt...institutionalized politics” to the “informal, often covert” practices of “everyday resistance” (Scott, 1985, p. 33). I seek to highlight what he has deemed “the vast territory between...two polar opposites” of overt collective defiance and “complete hegemonic compliance,” wherein true political life can be found (Scott, 1990, p. 136). To the “weapons of the weak” Scott analyses, I add a relational element, highlighting the potential of affective and emotionally driven resistance in Banjalukan society.

The emotion of love motivates activism, as we can observe in several protests globally and especially in the region; as Hromadžić has commented regarding the 2015 protests in Bihać, love emerged as a conspicuous theme among protesters, who describe their action as a “fight with our hearts” or doing “something in the name of love,” much like the *Pravda* protesters’ language (see chapter two) (Sponsel 2018, as cited by Hromadžić 2024, Hromadžić 2024, p. 152). As in her definition of “riverine citizenship,” Hromadžić’s concept of “riverine love” fosters “moral and emotional power” with the capacity to overcome fear (Hromadžić 2024, p. 153). The *Pravda* protesters in Banja Luka—but also those who are not directly politically engaged—have a love of their city and their country that sometimes overrides the emotions engendered by its dysfunction and corruption. This love mirrors riverine love: love defined by vital energy, social and nostalgic connection, and a sense of duty. Hromadžić’s note on the “polyvocal” nature of the Una river—its particular sonic frequency heard throughout Bihać—echoes in the *Pravda* movement via the soundscape of David’s lyrics performed everyday in the city’s center, inescapable and consuming regardless of the listener’s engagement or lack thereof (Hromadžić 2024, p. 62).

Importantly, the love inherent in David’s song or in the roar of the river does not affect all listeners equally. While riverine love or “riverine citizenship” has the potential for inclusion rather than exclusion, it also can be murky or hostile (in terms of the Una river) or threatening to the values of those who are traditionally nationalistic, work for the ruling political party, or who do not have the social and material capital to protest (in terms of the *Pravda* movement). This is “precisely what makes love political”—that it redraws borders of union and division (Hromadžić 2024, p. 155). Additionally, affects of love and a desire for positive change arise alongside their equally powerful opposites—hate and hopelessness. As this thesis will address, both antitheses

contribute to the contemporary emotional life of Banjalukans and to their desire to fight or to cope, to stay or to leave.

V. Chapterization

This dissertation will trace Banjalukans' emotional encounters with the state, from the direct violence of David's murder and collective gatherings of bodies in the square, to the ever-present and ambient life of the state in everyday life, and ultimately, to the ambivalence that is created around the question of belonging as Bosnians choose to stay and fight for Bosnia's future or leave and construct a future abroad.

The first chapter "A Bridge-like Existence" begins with the overarching theoretical application of Maria Todorova's theory of the Balkans' imagined geographies to Banja Luka (1997). Among her broader application of Edward Said's postcolonial theory to the Balkans, I will focus especially on her reference to Nietzsche's bridge metaphor in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and the intense experience of this bridge-like existence. I will argue that life in the de facto capital of the insecure entity/pseudo state of *Republika Srpska*—a place more unstable and also more difficult to define—creates an extreme form of "life on the bridge." After defining the theory of "the bridge-like existence," I head into a more detailed account of the government of *Republika Srpska* and the corruption therein. I also open up the possibility of resistance on "life on the bridge" and argue that Banjalukans are not static recipients or victims of corruption, but rather create "hidden transcripts" that although subtle, amount to resistant potential (Scott, 1990, p. 4-5). This lays the groundwork for how my informants in Banja Luka experience a spectrum of hope and disappointment—throughout the scenarios of protest or "overt resistance," everyday life or "covert resistance," and existential belonging explored in the subsequent chapters.

The second chapter, "Pravda za Davida: Hope and Mourning Against the State," begins by tracing the beginning of the *Pravda za Davida* protests prior to my period of fieldwork, then moves into the present iteration of the movement. This includes the relations I built with the *Pravdaši* and through this, the close-up view I gleaned of the protesters' struggles as targets of the state and efforts to resist via a campaign for the 2020 municipal elections. Affects of hope and mourning are addressed as equally important in the work of the remaining *Pravdaši*, as both open new possibilities for action beyond "activism" typically defined. Finally, I address possibilities for *Pravda za Davida* and a related movement in Sarajevo, *Pravda za Dženanu*, to transform ethno-national narratives about Bosnia.

The third chapter “Whose Corruption? Violence from Above and *Narod* Below” moves from the nominally politically active *Pravda* protesters into the realm of everyday life, where informal ways of getting things done through interpersonal relations produces two outcomes: the persistence of high-level of corruption but also the opening of new pathways for interpersonal relationships and the creation of a trans-ethnic “*narod*” or community. I will analyze both outcomes through my informants’ stories and mutually vulnerable, relational participant observation. On the one hand, my informants experience overreaches of state power in police raids, blocks and delays navigating bureaucracy, and in the worst case, threats to their livelihood when they display anti-party sentiment. On the other hand, they are aware of ways in which these gaps in oversight can be instrumentalized in their favor, allowing them to exert agency each time they mobilize human connection.

The fourth chapter “Where is ‘Home’? Uncertain Futures and the Question of Belonging” connects the issues explored in the preceding chapters to arguably the most pressing existential question of today’s Bosnian youth—whether to stay in Bosnia and fight for a more viable homeland, or to leave and seek a future elsewhere. Here, I circle back to the concept of a “bridge-like existence” as one not only spread in between geographic hegemony, but also in between temporalities. My informants still in Banja Luka witness the exodus of many of their friends and family, and remain at least relationally suspended between worlds. Those informants who do choose to leave express feelings of resentment and disappointment in Bosnia, but also nostalgia and an occasional desire to return. Both groups, while navigating this temporal existentialism, experience an affective intensity in discussions of their home. Thus, I will conclude the final chapter with reference to belonging and more specifically “love” as a driving affect—as also in the case of the *Pravda* protests—that while irrational, characterizes the “abnormality of life on the bridge.”

Chapter One: A Bridge-like Existence

In this chapter, I begin by explaining the metaphor running behind and through my approaches to Banja Luka: the concept of a “bridge” or “bridge-like existence” derived from Maria Todorova’s work on depictions of the Balkans as Europe’s “other” within. Both spatially and temporally, I posit that Banja Luka comprises an extreme version of “the bridge” due to its status as the de facto capital of the politically unstable and semantically unclear *Republika Srpska* or “Serb Republic” within Bosnia. Various referred to as “the state” with functioning independent bodies, a state *within* the broader state of Bosnia, or as one of two “entities” within Bosnia, it forms the paragon of the bridge-like existence of the Balkans as a whole, characterized by instability but also by creativity and potential. On the ground, this ambivalence can be seen materially in the presence of *Republika Srpska* and Bosnian state flags as well as in the presence of *Republika Srpska*-specific institutions such as a postal system, police department, judicial court, and building of the national assembly that one may ordinarily associate with a broader nation-state. I then delve into the contextualization of the political structure of *Republika Srpska*, as well as the pervasive corruption inherent to that system. Finally, I offer ethnographic accounts of state encounters that open up questions that reverberate throughout the following chapters: What do Banjalukans endure under the rule of *Republika Srpska*, and what can be called resistance?

1.1 The bridge in imagined geographies of the Balkans

Despite its origin in the mountain range separating Romania from Bulgaria, the phrase “Balkans” carries longstanding orientalist implications. From as early as the 1930s, it was employed as a derogatory term, both by Western outsiders and by contingents within the region that sought to distance themselves from the term’s implied “disorder” and inferiority. Even in attempts to use the less politically imbued “Southeastern Europe,” the region and its imagined characteristics were influenced by Germany’s quest to dominate the region and force its multiplicities into an easily dominated collective (Todorova, 1997, p. 28). Throughout the twentieth century, the imagined geographies surrounding the term ebbed and flowed depending upon whether the nations in question could “attain” the anti-Balkan signifier, “European.” For instance, Romanian scholars in the 1930s resented the fact that the people who “nourished the theater and music of ancient Greece and the thought of Plato...had given Rome so many emperors and dignitaries” bore a name with Turkish origins (Todorova, 1997, p. 29). Similarly, German scholars took only the historical sway of hegemonic powers, such as the Habsburgs and Ottomans, or Rome and

Byzantium, into account when drawing the geography of the Balkans; due to apparent similarities with the West, for example, they often excluded Hungarians from the name. The rhetoric of period travelogues insists that the Hungarians “resent[ed] being called Balkanites” and considered themselves “greatly superior to the Slavic people of the Balkans” (Todorova, 1997, p. 29).

Even elite Balkan intellectuals have interpellated certain archetypal Balkan characteristics that absorb and reflect the Western gaze. The literary hero Bay Ganyo Balkanski created by Bulgarian writer Aleko Konstantinov, for instance, came to stand for “boorishness, crudeness, grossness” even among Bulgarians themselves. The same phenomena can be illustrated in post-communist Albania, where Christian values became lauded as the next generation’s only hope against, as one Albanian article put it, “the Islamization of life [in the Balkans] and primitiveness of our social and economic development” (Todorova, 1997, p. 45). Fascinatingly, this pattern spans several of Todorova’s examples from Balkan discursive history; the terms coarse, cruel, ruthless, bantering, materialist, telluric, and rude recur, seemingly as much in Balkan peoples’ self-designation as in their stigmatization by others. While many of Todorova’s cases are more extreme, including expressions of hatred and rejection of one’s ancestry, the same structural processes apply. Even into the 1990s during the beginnings of Yugoslavia’s dissolution, Yugoslav writers living in Western Europe referred to the region as “down there” in the “mounds of death,” diametrically opposing their own culture to a “higher” one and reiterating Enlightenment/Neo-Platonist/Christian associations between knowledge and power with upward movement (Todorova, 1997, p. 53). Other discourses described the Yugoslav wars as an animalistic quest for “soil and blood”, hypocritically distancing violence and territorial expansion from Western histories.

However, an internalization of the term “balkanization,” can be set against an embracing and affirmation of the region’s position between East and West. In opposition to self-stigmatization comes an unabashed “self-designation,” to borrow Todorova’s term. In addition to the Western gaze and the internalized Western gaze some Balkanites turn upon themselves emerges a third discourse of re-appropriation and empowerment that sees the multiplicity and disunity—and with it, the difficulty of being understood and governed by an Other—of the Balkans as boon instead of bane. Near the end of the Bosnian war, a Croat playwright Slobodan Snajder proclaimed, “I would like to stress that this is not only a region of misfortunes but also a space in which the strong traditions that have shaped European culture are oscillating” (Todorova, 1997, p. 54). This implies a spirit of creativity and change, instead of animalistic violence, deriving from unsettled times (Swidler, 1986). From such a perspective, the mechanisms of self-stigmatization

could turn to de-stigmatization, from an assertion that one is not either East or West to an assertion that one is both East and West, occupying an exclusive positionality that both hegemonies, crystallized and essentialized as in Said's works, cannot.

To describe this in between, Todorova beautifully employs the Nietzschean aphorism from the prologue of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: "What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal" (Todorova, 1997, p. 59; Nietzsche, 2006). The "abnormality of life on the bridge" is not easy, as Balkan cultures historically engaged in violent clashes, both symbolic and bodily, between hegemonies. But Todorova, herself a Bulgarian intellectual, suggests that Balkan nations turn the discourse towards a Nietzschean pride in undergoing and overcoming, in having to exert more effort towards maintaining their ontological status than the less threatened hegemonies on either side of the "bridge"; it might "be helpful...to repeat occasionally Nietzsche's dictum...that 'What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal'" (Todorova, 1997, p.59).⁴

The force of the bridge metaphor and its prevalence beyond theoretical observation is evidenced by a conversation with my friend Aleksa when he was just nineteen and studying philosophy at the University of Banja Luka. He explained to me in his classic self-ironic tone the tumultuous history of the region: "You've got us [Serbs] settling here, killing a lot of people and settling in, you've got Orthodox Christianity taking its hold, basically a feudal empire. You've got the Turkish empire taking over and then years of blood mixing to the point where people who hate Muslims are...Muslim ourselves." At the end of his summary, Aleksa looked me in the eyes and repeated Todorova's theory back to me in his own words, nodding to Ivo Andrić's novel *Bridge on the Drina* just as Todorova did: "One of our writers described this area as a bridge—a very beautiful place, but it's not a good place to live." As I will explore in chapters three and four, several informants echoed this sentiment, taking pride in their bridge-like existence during crises such as covid (one friend remarked "we have lived through a war, we can live through this easily"), but ultimately faced with the temporal existentialism of whether to stay "on the bridge" or to move abroad.

⁴ It is important to note that while I rely on this Todorovan concept of the "bridge," discussions on "Balkanism" as an offshoot of "Orientalism" have evolved in recent years, calling attention to the potential for Balkanism to further marginalize and/or negate the agency of Balkan scholarship. One solution is to foreground research from within the Balkans. See Diane Mishkova's book *Beyond Balkanism*, wherein she aims to view the Balkans "primarily inside-out...towards its 'self' and the outside world, where the west is important but not the sole referent" (Mishkova, 2018, p. 6).

1.2 The bridge as “the underworld”: navigating *Republika Srpska* politics

“Banja Luka has a soul; it’s just a dark one.” -Miloš, clerk at a furniture store

“Here is like a grenade, it just needs a match. We love each other, and hate each other. People from the war are in power, it’s a mafia, and that’s it.” - Djordje, taxi driver

“All I can call it is the underworld.” -Danilo, digital marketing specialist

Danilo G., a digital marketing specialist in his thirties, occupied the seat across from me at the end of a long table at one post-conference dinner in Tirana. We both marveled at our luck; having had arrived late, I had no other seat to choose from, and ended up with Danilo, who originally hailed from Prnjavor, a town just outside of Banja Luka. After listening intently about my research on *Pravda*, he said, “Well, I think you’re too positive,” laughing to himself despite his subsequent explanation of what he deemed “the underworld” that Banjalukans are up against. He explained the “underworld” as the relentless situation that underneath the surface, “all is mafia,” a view held universally, to greater or lesser extents, by all of my informants. He also maintained that the price of protesting or publicly revealing the machinations of that underworld would have dire consequences.

As I have explained in the above section 1.1, the Balkans broadly speaking are often described using the metaphor of a bridge in reference to their historical position between hegemonies. This is seen emically and etically, alternately placed upon the Balkans as an othering concept or used in a self-stigmatizing or self-ironic way by people from the region who in doing so reclaim the definition. In this section, the Nietzschean “bridge-like existence” is considered as an existential rather than geographical, identitarian, or political concept. It is a way of being that is threatened by instability but simultaneously emboldened by the constant need to reconstitute itself in the face of that instability. In using Danilo’s chosen term, “the underworld,” here, I don’t intend to create a second concept—rather to conjure how deeply my informants are disturbed by Banja Luka’s corrupt landscape and how they relate it to biblical or absolute evil. However, I will also explain what makes the mafia-led political situation bridge-like, namely, how its porous and slippery nature leaves in-between spaces that can be filled by resistant affect and action.

In order to understand the extent and effect of the “underworld” on the bridge-like existence, I privilege the stories of my informants, which I will highlight both here and in chapters two and three. It is my intent to show the damages done, ways of coping, and potential for resistance from a grounded perspective rather than to write a macro analysis of those in power. However,

an explanation of how *Republika Srpska* came to be and how corruption flourishes under Milorad Dodik's rule will help the reader to understand the current state of corruption.

The story begins broadly with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, from which we can trace the series of controversial steps that led to present circumstances. Following the referendum on the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina held in February and March of 1992, several Serbs boycotted the results, citing a plebiscite held in Serb regions wherein 96% voted for joining the Yugoslav federation created by Serbia and Montenegro (Kreća, 1996). The results of the referendum showed a majority vote for independence; hence, independence from Yugoslavia was declared. Within months of the republic's independence gaining international recognition, the name "*Republika Srpska*" was adopted, and the political dispute surrounding its existence would contribute significantly to the Bosnian War. This war would wreak havoc on the region until 1995, killing at least 100,000 and displacing more than two million, leaving a still-standing legacy of trauma (Lampe, 2025). During the war, the Army of Republika Srpska was responsible for several deadly campaigns, including the infamous Srebrenica genocide. Although it continued to exist until 2006, today's *Republika Srpska* does not have an independent army; rather, its police force often takes on the role of protecting R.S. interests and perform what resembles a military parade for pro-state events such as the annual *Dan Republike* or Day of the Republic. While declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the event continues to this day, complete with hundreds of *Republika Srpska* flags lining Banja Luka's main street, fastidiously coordinated marches, and the blaring of pro-Serb anthems.

Associated with this event and indeed the history of *Republika Srpska* is today's president of the entity, Milorad Dodik. While serving in the National Assembly of *Republika Srpska* during the war, he would form the Independent Members of Parliament Caucus to oppose the majority-holding Serb Democrat Party. This caucus precipitated the eventual creation of the Party of Independent Social Democrats or SNSD, which maintains monopolistic control of *Republika Srpska* still. Among promises to "guard" the safety and interests of Serbs, Dodik frequently raises alarm by citing "enemies" who "do not want a strong Serbia" or who "fear Serbian unity" ("Dodik ahead of protest in Serbia," 2025). Underlying each of his election campaigns is the separatist belief that the influence of the West is the source of the entity's social and economic problems, and the vision that Serbs in Bosnia will declare themselves as belonging to the R.S. as an independent entity ("Dodik: European Path," 2025).

The fear perpetuated by these statements is twofold: the ethno-nationalist imagination of Serb victimhood and the association between Milorad Dodik's oligarchic power and "the underworld" of hidden interests. The first discourse displaces the source of fear from the true enemy of the people—Dodik—to the "others," while the second reveals the oligarchy Dodik has created within his family and their rampant business connections. Without the consent of his party—for which there are no viable alternatives—achieving goals major and minor becomes difficult in *Republika Srpska*. My informants constantly referenced the widely known procurement of public funds and taxes by politicians for personal gain, and pointed to the obscene wealth of Dodik's family at their expense.

Corruption has only grown worse according to reports from 2025; Bosnia on the whole ranked as second worst country in Europe on the Corruption Perceptions Index, which is "most visible" in the media repression and disablement of "associations not controlled by the government" in Republika Srpska ("Worst Result Yet," 2025). Mafia and "state-embedded" groups "play important roles in the underworld" of Bosnia, and enjoy the protection of the state apparatus, often regardless of their ethnic belonging to Serbs, Bosniaks, or Croats (Organized Crime Index, 2023). Furthermore, members of these groups are often also members of "dominant political parties" and state institutions, leading to overlapping interests between these bodies and criminal networks (Organized Crime Index, 2023).

The continued relevance of what Danilo called the "underworld" to the political reality of *Republika Srpska* sends an already insecure entity or "state" into further unsteadiness on "the bridge." The state of *Republika Srpska* and all of its complexity and flaws render it quite the "social subject in everyday life," making its way into even the most mundane scenarios (Aretxaga, 2005, p. 257). Drawing from Aretxaga, we may note that *Republika Srpska* gains legitimacy through "performances and public representations of statehood...discourses, narratives and fantasies generated around the idea of the state," but also through subjective "bodily excitations and sensualities" that we see in the people—the *subjective* component without which "the state cannot exist" (Aretxaga, 2005, p. 257). This subjective component "links its form to the dynamics of people and movements," and emerges in Banjalukans' affective responses to the state its underworld.

Like Danilo, my friend Milan T., in his late twenties, could hardly contain his disappointment while explaining his views of *Republika Srpska* and Dodik's regime, and his subjective relation to the state boiled over into his words. During our strolls he would point to a new bridge being built bizarrely close to the existing bridges that border the construction site on either side.

Gesturing towards the otherwise peaceful scene at the river Vrbas, he lamented, “They will make what is beautiful ugly.” A soft spoken and peaceful person, he would still conclude, “We would have to kill them all with one bomb” after discussing how the chain of corruption could possibly be dismantled.

He especially noted the regime’s fragility in their response to one anti-corruption protest aligned with *Pravda za Davida* in 2019:

“If they admit to anything, even the smallest thing, everything falls apart for them. It would be like a house of cards falling down on them. They literally cannot concede to anything at any level. I don’t think this has happened anywhere in the world—the opposition parties had a protest and the party in charge, SNSD, had a counter protest, so they were protesting the protest because they cannot admit that they might have done something wrong. I’m sure someone will make super funny jokes in the future, but when a leading party is protesting, who are they protesting against? I mean, are you kicking yourself in the head or what?”

In addition to their fragility, he also pointed to their hypocrisy, noting that many SNSD politicians urge people to stay in Bosnia in an attempt to stymie the ongoing trend of emigration (see chapter four) despite the fact that they have moved their own families—or themselves—from Bosnia. He explained that they would not be able to cope the way an “average person” must with obtaining licenses in order to pursue projects, perpetually stuck in a mode of “waiting” as plans are perpetually pushed back—unless they can give a bribe. Using the story of his friend who wanted to build a house, he noted that at certain points after applying for permission,

“that paper was in their office for five months, and they didn’t do a thing. They just have to sign it. You come to their office and give them whatever and they just sign it, and you move forward. Completely nuts. And if you don’t have a connection, I heard a percentage of 50-70% of houses in Banja Luka don’t have the right licenses. They just bribe enough people to skip that process. And if you’re not in the party, you might be able to get that building license, but if anything you have to pay a monthly racket fee. That’s the minimum: paying off so you don’t get in trouble.” On activities from starting a business to building a house, Milan concluded that “those things just drain your soul on how impossible they are. Not literally impossible, but in any reasonable way for a normal person. I say I want to do things in the right way. But then you just hit a wall of stupidity and corruption and you’re dying everyday.”

Milan's feeling of frustration to the point of "dying" is representative of the feelings of many of my informants, not excluding those who have decided to join SNSD. My neighbor's daughter Andrea was one of them. Most times I left the building that summer, she greeted me while playing with her own daughter, along with my other neighbors sitting every evening on the stoop of the six-unit flat I moved into after leaving Jelena and Duško's. As a single parent, age 34, she often brought her daughter to my flat building, where many happenstance meetings led to us planning a hike to the *Banj Brdo* or *Sehitluci* monument to fallen World War II soldiers.

As we lurched uphill to the monument, we connected over personal themes like disappointment in our dating lives and in men in general. As we walked, she grabbed my arm affectionately with every interjection and bout of laughter. Moving on to other themes as we ascended the hill, she explained her frustrations in her work as a statistician for the state and thus under the auspices of SNSD. She had worked on several high-level projects, such as the 2013 census—the first since the war—and considered herself a "leader" with the potential to aspire to higher challenges. But despite her desire to move up in her department, she knew that she could only do so through the right connections or "deals." Corruption, she held, was the main reason young people wanted to leave, and she was shocked when I mentioned friends that had left and subsequently desired to (or had already made the choice to) return. Convinced that the coronavirus pandemic had made the situation "even worse," our conversation flitted between a distilled enjoyment of the present hike and a disenchanted view of her future, in which her skills would never outdo the machinations of the "the underworld."

The same feelings were hinted at during a conversation with my friend Milica, who had worked with the party *Ujedinje Srpska* or US, which participates in the governing coalition with SNSD and would indeed cease to function if it presented SNSD with a substantive challenge. While I had seen many photographs of Milica beaming behind her *Ujedinje Srpska* pin, and she became guarded when our conversation tended towards state criticism, she eventually revealed her complex relation to the party. She revealed a similar disappointment as Andrea's—her efforts to be a "commendable" worker with strong opinions were not rewarded. Rather, her strong voice was a possible reason that her contract was not renewed:

"Simply after three years without explanation, we did not extend. No matter what I did on the job, I was one of the most commendable actors. I was commended by the government of Hungary, praised by our ministry, I finished training, certificates....I've always said my opinion. You can't have your opinion, only theirs. I think it eventually happened because I always spoke publicly, clearly, and loudly in my opinion. About

everything and everyone. I don't know, maybe that's it. Because there's no reason, if I've done everything perfectly, without mistakes."

Before her stint at US, Milica had protested alongside *Pravda za Davida* from the first days of the movement. "Mostly I was there since day one. Someone just disappeared...I was worried, I was thinking if there was some way I could help...But now I think people are tired. In terms of revolt, rebellion, desire for change, we have no results. There is no final truth—the one we expect and know." She explained that she was never afraid during her time with *Pravda* to state her opinions publicly at "the cost of anything," but she was not working for the state at that point. When she began her job at US, "the party made a bit of fuss" but did not "disturb [her] personally." If her involvement with *Pravda* had a hand in her dismissal, it was not something they were willing to admit. Perhaps it would destabilize the "house of cards" Milan had referred to; to even put into words Milica's involvement during the height of the *Pravda za Davida* protests would threaten their legitimacy.

As I will discuss further in chapter four, both Milan and Milica felt that leaving Bosnia was the only way to escape the broad effects of the "underworld," whether on the ability to protest as in the case of *Pravda*, to hold a government position, or to surpass the "wall of stupidity" that stands in their way of routine procedures. In the confusion and frustration it engenders, the state could be sensed everywhere, god-like in its ability to block ventures small and large, and made all the more "sacred" by its ambiguity (Taussig, 1997, p. 114). Life within the pseudo "state" or entity of *Republika Srpska* embodies the metaphor of the "bridge" for Balkan life, uncertain and undefinable, as corruption seeps its way into even the mundane. However, its presence also offers perspectives and practices I propose as "resistant" in the following section.

1.3 The bridge as "the crucifix": resistant potential in the "bridge-like existence"

Todor, a twenty-five year old rising TikTok star and singer for a local band, joined me and Sandra at Boom Boom Room, one of the anti-turbofolk bars where international pop hits blare until dawn. Sandra, her sister, and I used to call Boom Boom Room a stop on the night out "tour," on which our steps would resemble from a birds-eye view a map from a cartoon ticked with winding and non-sensical paths. This tour would always include colorful characters who sought to explain to me what Banjalukan society really means.

Over beats that shook my chest, Todor was eager to educate me, the outsider and indeed the American, on everything Balkan, from Nikola Tesla to the people of Serbia holding taunting targets on their backs during the NATO bombing campaign in 1999. But when our conversation turned to philosophy, he said, “Have you read Hegel? All smart men were madmen! Tesla, Hegel...they were all beyond reason. Jesus, too. Here in Banja Luka, we are also crucified—crucified between east and west.” Reflecting on Todor’s speech, I noticed that he had a great pride in this christ-like definition of his city—not even because of christ himself, really, but because his pride was in spite of its difficult position “between east and west,” and, as I have explained through Maria Todorova’s work, resting on a “bridge” between various hegemonic influences and potential futures.

A similar moment occurred during a conversation with my friend Saša, an artist in his early 40s who had lived abroad in Canada and Japan, and returned to Banja Luka to work on illustration projects for children’s books. Although I hadn’t asked about his early life, he began our coffee with nothing short of an extraordinary story. I was held captive by his explanation of how he first left Banja Luka in hopes of dodging the draft when the war broke out, since he had already turned eighteen. This led to an arduous saga of living in turns in Serbia and Croatia, first with an abusive priest, and later with family members who had abusive, alcoholic husbands. In one instance during these travels, he nearly lost his life:

“I’m sitting on the bus. We get to the border. I had documents but they expired. My passport expired in ’92. We get to the passport check. War was raging. We stop at the [Bosnian-Croatian] border. Everyone says I’m insane when I tell this story. They ask, ‘Why were you running towards the war? You were supposed to run to the other side.’ I was heading straight into the war. I was going in Krajina in the middle of Croatia. They stopped us on the bus, I gave my passport, and the soldier gets to the doors and screams out my name and says, ‘Get the fuck out, get the fuck out!’ So he pulls me into the little house. I’m sitting inside and he’s freaking out. He says that I’m running away from the war, I’m deserting, I’m a traitor, and he put the Kalashnikov [rifle] on my head. He wanted to take me out to the back and kill me. The bus driver comes and says, ‘What is happening! Why?’ And the guy tells him, he says, ‘Do you know that you have a deserter in your bus? You have an escapee in your bus?’ And the driver’s like, ‘No, I had no idea what are you talking about. Son, where are you going, son?’ I said, ‘I’m going to my cousins pig farm.’ And this bus driver is amazing, my god, wherever he is. He said, ‘So when you go there you’re gonna go, and you’re gonna get new documents, you’re gonna go and get papers and do everything legally?’ And I was like, ‘Yeah of course I will,’ and

the bus driver said, ‘See, he’s gonna be okay, he’s gonna go enlist in the army.’ The army guy looks at him and takes the Kalashnikov off my head and pushed me and said, ‘Get the fuck back on the bus, I don’t want to see your fucking face, get the fuck out.’ And the bus driver hugged me and said, ‘Okay get back on the bus, son, you see, everyone’s going crazy,’ and so I sat, and that’s it.”

This shocking account was followed by his travels to Belgrade, where he applied for Canadian rather than American asylum at the embassy simply because the Canadian line was shorter. Some months later at his cousin’s pig farm, he received an unexpected call—his application was accepted and he would receive asylum in Canada. His subsequent life in Toronto working at a record store, and his eventual decision to move to Tokyo, found him teaching English to Japanese children through untraditional, art-driven methods. His art would eventually showcase his perception of Banja Luka.

He explained that he is currently working on a project involving illustrations for children’s coloring books and posters of Banja Luka, especially the “small things no one notices” in the city. He attended a meeting with a government representative who could get him funding, but Saša said her positive reaction was only a performance: “She said, “This is amazing, we would love this!” but nothing happened. We sent one email, nothing happened, another email, nothing happened, called her once, nothing.” At an exhibit opening at the museum soon after that, one of Saša’s pieces was on display. There, he noticed the same woman from the government office, and noticed that she turned her back to him. But Saša’s friend who had joined him at the exhibition knew her, and when they were “introduced” again, she learned for the first time that Saša had lived in Canada for nine years and Japan for seven years. Her attitude suddenly changed at the mention of Saša’s social capital; he had never mentioned his international past at their first meeting. “You know, I was like, hey, I’m bringing a project. Let’s work on the fucking project.” Still, her piqued interest yielded no result. “Everything is politics here, business is politics, art is politics, but anyways, that’s life here,” he concluded.

Saša had also tried to help with the city’s application for candidacy as the future European Capital of Culture. He noticed how the authorities barely listened to experts, cultural leaders, NGO representatives, or artists, and he left the meeting feeling hopeless. The ultimate proposal did not take his vision into account. “I wanted something for seniors and young people to be represented.” As we melted in the heat of the park, he pointed emphatically at the cigarette butts on the ground, then a group of elderly men chatting over a chess game. “*This* is Banja Luka! And that is not.” “That” referred to the glossy proposal for candidacy that ultimately prevailed,

boasting infrastructure plans that added more concrete to the cityscape and according to Saša, “looked more like Berlin than Banja Luka.” Its goals were reflected in the concurrent political slogan “Banja Luka *se gradi*” or “Banja Luka is being built up,” plastered on billboards across Banja Luka and signalling the construction of a new shopping center, a hotel, residential sites, and new roundabouts, the financing of which lined the pockets of SNSD politicians (Telebak, 2019). But “this”—the everyday pile of flicked cigarette butts and men forming community over gossip and a chess game—referred to the character beyond the state-sponsored narrative of the winning project.

I felt enamored by Saša’s finding beauty in cigarette butts and a chess game, and wondered why they reminded me of Todor’s pontifications on the “crucifix.” Following his autobiographical account of trauma, Saša still wondered why people questioned his return after sixteen years, or insisted that it’s better elsewhere. “In Tokyo there’s no green,” he said. I realized that his art projects, highlighting the unnoticed and undervalued aspects of Banja Luka, related to Todor’s philosophical pontifications and desire for me to know about Balkan history. Despite the suffering inherent in the “crucifix” metaphor, both Todor and Saša’s vision counter the nihilism that might arise from encounters with “the underworld,” and prompted me to question the “resistant” potential even in small things like cigarettes leftover from a meeting of friends on a bench, or chess games as platforms for community-building. In these “hidden transcripts” taking place “offstage” the observation of the powerful, we see gestures, speeches, and practices that can either confirm or contradict the public transcript (Scott, 1990, p. 4-5). As I will explore in further chapters, my informants regularly resisted by contradicting the public transcript either in words or affective engagements of frustration and rejection of rules. While engaging in *Republika Srpska*-specific institutions such as the postal system, police department, police department, or referring to their identity as “Serbian” rather than “Bosnian,” their ire at the corrupt manner in which they are ruled caused them to decry the state-narrative pushed by “the underworld.”

I discussed the approach of my study with Saša, noting that these subterranean practices are generally not discussed as resistant in Banja Luka, and that the focus tends to lie more squarely on top-down approaches to the functioning of “the underworld.” However, I acknowledged the same feelings of fear working within me—fears of surveillance and consequences of interference—that stemmed from that underworld. When I shared with him my anxieties about working with *Pravda za Davida*, he responded, “You should really do that, because anyone warning you is basing their knowledge on fear. Some people just say they want to do a lot, and

never act.” I would soon see that the *Pravda* activists embodied the opposite of fear, perhaps due to their love of Banja Luka in all its cigarette piles and chess game languor.

Chapter Two: *Pravda za Davida*: Hope and Mourning Against the State

The disturbing case of the state-led murder of 21-year old David Dragičević in 2018 gave way to the largest social movement in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina—*Pravda za Davida* or Justice for David. While war profiteers continue to dominate nationalist administrations and corporations, *Pravda* activists offer a vision of extreme care, uniting regularly in formal and informal capacities under the leadership of Davor to sing lyrics written by the late David himself: “It looks like I’m not gonna get away/Because I’m just another peon in this story/I’m not going anywhere, I’ve done the damage/I’m just another kid in the ghetto.” Their mourning for the late David Dragičević and for the future of Bosnia itself exists alongside genuine hope, precisely because that mourning is collective.

In this chapter, I will explore affects of hope and mourning through my fieldwork, undertaken as an activist ethnographer who shared part of the *Pravda* activists’ vulnerability in the face of the state, albeit of course from my perspective as an American researcher with the option to exit in case of danger. This took the form of participating in public demonstrations, campaigning for the political party *Pokret Pravde*, as well as sitting in closed door meetings of *Pokret Pravde* and the leaders of the movement. I also explored the inter-ethnic potential of the movement by traveling with the *Pravda* activists to Sarajevo for a demonstration in solidarity with *Pravda za Dženana Memića*, a movement formed in response to the lack of investigation of the murder of Dženan Memić in Sarajevo in 2016. I also considered perceptions of the movement by the general population and especially the youth, who variously saw the movement as evidence that change was possible or as evidence that resistance in Bosnia is futile. As in the following chapter, I seek to subvert and make more intricate the top-down approaches that usually ossify Banja Luka and its inhabitants, negating their agency. I hope to offer an alternate illustration of how the people of post-socialist, post-war, and post-Dayton *Republika Srpska* are not “stuck” in transition, but rather have radical potential that, while usurped by the state, also uses friendship and love to resist. Secondly, I want to situate my fieldwork with the *Pravda* activists within the context of a “social movement” that is past its height in terms of numbers of participants and media attention, and thus at times regarded with suspicion or even pity by the broader society. The kleptocratic regime, the international community’s disinterest in what is a non-palatable, non-commercial, or even a dangerous case, as well as the public’s acceptance of anti-*Pravda* and anti-David conspiracy theories, have all amounted to challenge *Pravda*’s progress. We might

define the ongoing *Pravda* movement's success by its rituals of mourning and hope rather than by typical definitions of social movements. The fight continues despite—and in spite of—a lack of teleological end in sight.

Thus, I will analyze my activist ethnography chronologically, but not teleologically, swinging from moments of vitality and hope to moments of despair and mourning. I will conclude that both emotional processes give birth to new ways of perceiving the state, following Jessica Greenburg's concept of the "politics of disappointment," in which:

"the contradictions and contingencies of democratic practice became a terrain for a new kind of democratic agency. Despite the deeply normative commitments that student activists in Serbia had toward procedural and liberal forms of democracy, their experience of democratic politics as imperfect and contingent produced a pragmatism that allowed for a break with the temporal logics of modernist and utopian political horizons." (Greenburg, 2014, p. 5)

This politics of disappointment requires its subjects to "embrac[e] a present suffused with the disappointments of impossible revolutions and unrealizable futures....and to frame and stage a present-focused politics that [is] necessarily contradictory and inconsistent" (Greenburg, 2014, p. 51). In other words, related to the "bridge-like existence" defined in chapter one, a politics of disappointment accepts contradictory ways of being and even derives power from this contradiction.

2.1 *Pravda's* early days

My preliminary ethnography of *Pravda za Davida* in 2018 revealed dramatically increased stakes of violence. Dodik asserted that with his election, David's father Davor would be forcibly removed, and Davor responded both through words and through his physical return to the square that he was ready to die. Far more than anecdotal, this rhetoric relates to the broader spatio-temporal phenomenology of contemporary Banja Luka, where the "subordination that is always rooted in necessity and the alleged need to avoid death" has given way to "sovereignty" that "definitely calls for the risk of death" (Mbembe & Meintjes, 2003, p.16).

My first foray into this story was in June 2018, when my friend Sandra and I arranged an interview with Davor, later meant to be published in *Balkanist* magazine. To witness the protest was, at that time, heartening and not ridden with fear. Our conversation with Davor, though, was more difficult, not only because of the heaviness of his loss, but also because the beauty of

his determination was blinding. Davor explained that the media relegated his efforts to Soros- or opposition party-funded propaganda, and that he was regularly followed and surveilled by a state whose lack of a concern for rule of law meant he faced dangers far beyond the slander of the media.

The media also slandered the memory of David, painting him as a “junkie” merely due to his association with the counter-culture. Press conferences by *Republika Srpska* police claimed that just prior to his death, David had participated in a fist fight with three other young men in front of a café, and that there were “stolen items” found in his backpack, including a laptop, a USB memory stick, 200 km (Bosnian marks) in cash, a Swiss army knife, and keys to the house he had supposedly robbed (Majstorović, 2021, p. 150-151). To add to his “criminal” character, the media even leaned into David’s long dreadlocks. Indeed, David set dreadlocks in his friends’ hair—many of whom held onto the dreads after his passing. A hip-hop musician, his music was indeed resistant but not untrue or criminal, as we see in his lyrics to “Klinac u Getu” about his stance as a “peon” in the “story” of Banja Luka’s corruption.

Nonetheless, the narrative of David as a “criminal” took hold via the media and via the circulation of gossip throughout Banja Luka; many referred to stories of stories of stories, and so on, about David as associated with drugs, or even as lazy or rude. Some of my informants almost seemed resentful that the image of his face behind sunglasses, his bandana, and his dreads came to signify anti-corruption, truth, and justice; they pointed to their own accolades and asked me why they should stand behind banners of his visage.

On the other side, Davor and his ever-growing circle held the narrative that what happened to David could have happened to anyone—or to anyone’s child. In the autumn of 2019, Davor turned to civil disobedience, sleeping in a tent on *Davidog Trg* in order to amplify the call for justice and increase pressure on Dodik. In addition to informally naming the square, arguably the most familiar meeting point for Banjalukans, after David, Davor’s occupation of the square in his tent symbolized a spatial/territorial acquisition of public space from the state and for the side of the resistance. Given the lack of any genuine opposition party in Republika Sprksa (all are overtly or tacitly approved by SNSD, who could block funding or in the worst case violently deter any opponent that threatened them), Davor’s occupation of the square was the only remaining a form of resistance besides the protests. His commentary to the press during this time centered around the loss of his son, including statements that he would build a house on the square because his own house had been metaphorically demolished by the murder (“Davor Dragičević sklonio šator i automobil sa Trga Krajine, 2018”). But he also nodded to the broader

significance of the *Pravda za Davida* movement as a battle against the corrupt state—which would increasingly become true over the following months and years. “I am well aware who I am up against: the whole state apparatus...There’s no country that would admit murder. Not one,” he remarked in an interview with the New York Times (Surk, 2019). In one of his speeches at the main square, he declared,

“I am a first class, disabled war veteran. I am neither a terrorist, nor an Islamist, nor an intelligence type. My struggle is one for justice and truth. I, Davor Dragičević, do publicly declare that my son was tortured and brutally killed, on someone’s explicit order. I want truth and justice no matter how brutal. You killed my child. You ended my line. I demand that the deputies declare whether this was a suicide or murder” (Majstorović, 2021, p. 151).

Davor’s bravery made a stark contrast with the fear that many held of the state of *Republika Srpska*—a fear that exists not only as an individual emotion, but as a constructor of far-reaching social realities. As Ahmed notes, “fear does not involve the defense of borders that already exist; rather, fear makes those borders” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 128). From the early days of the movement, I found groups formed and borders drawn by Davor’s performance of grief, which not only lived in David’s family and in bodies assembling in protest, but also had the power to form new social assemblages delineating pro- and anti-state sentiment across *Republika Srpska*.

Already, the force of Davor’s strength in the face of such fear had made it overwhelming for me to write as a journalist. But after traveling to Banja Luka to create some ambient recordings of the *Pravda za Davida* protest on December 8 and 9, everything changed. On the morning of the “Bloody Christmas” on which special forces descended upon the main square, while home for the holidays, I woke up in a rural Pennsylvania Holiday Inn to texts from Sandra, sent in the middle of her nighttime in CET (Central European Time). “I dreamt they took Davor.” And the next text, sent in her noontime and my morning, said that her dream had been a prophesy. “It happened.”

Special forces had taken advantage of the holiday and subsequent dearth of media coverage in order to storm the daily protest on the square. Violent clashes between police and civilians even resulted in bloodshed, and the forceful removal of *Davidovo srce* or “David’s heart,” a heart-shaped memorial of photographs, flowers, and candles that had been re-lit daily for eight months, held its own symbolic violence. Located in the direct geographical center of Banja Luka, the heart had become a “gravitational center” for “an always already melancholy community,” to borrow Alice von Bieberstein and Nora Tataryan’s commentary on the site of dissident Hrant Dink’s murder in Turkey (Tataryan, 2012, as cited in von Bieberstein, 2017, p.

60). People had drifted to the spontaneous memorial, drawn by its “affective resonance” in the days and even months following the murder, and this event only added to the power of its symbolism; as I will explain later in the chapter, its removal rendered it a site of contestation even as it later moved from the main square to the river-side site of David’s murder (Berlant, 2011, as cited in von Bieberstein, 2017, p. 60).

In the following week, I received more and more dispatches of developing information. Was Davor in a state of torture? No, he was able to hide in the mosque, as a Serb, and he will go into exile in Austria. I maintained a façade of normalcy during some holiday brunches while occasionally taking calls from Banja Luka to hear rumors of a coup. I considered that since the Bloody Christmas, just two weeks after my recording, foreigners and journalist attempting to record the protest had been detained. My decision to quit the article for *Balkanist* started to feel less cowardly. New Year’s Eve, usually a more epic celebration than Orthodox or Catholic Christmas, as is post-socialist tradition, came and went with Banja Lukan friends recounting a state of fear, disbelief, and dejection in place of partying. Instead, the sounds of Davor’s agony, of the crowd’s political fatigue boiling over into fury, the speakers blaring a song David himself wrote, and even the silence of mourning, signified something else entirely. The call to prayer from the *ferhadija* mosque sometimes coincided with the 6:00 pm *Pravda* gatherings that I joined on visits to Banja Luka, adding a sense of the spiritual beyond Bosnia’s tri-partite ethno-religious division, and hinting at a new struggle against the state that eclipsed that division.

2.2 Joining the movement

The visa process and my fear of surveillance, followed by the strict covid lockdowns from March to May of 2020, hindered my fieldwork. On top of this, I wrestled with the morality of entering what was in many ways a sacred movement—one that aimed towards universal principles and provided a space for mourning to those who had been close to David. The remaining activists who gathered in turns at the meeting of the *Vrba*s and *Crkvena* rivers, near the Orthodox church in the center, or again on the main square (which they named David’s square or *Davidov trg*) when attempts to arrest them waned, were those who had stayed with the movement through several trials (literal and figurative), arrests, and in sum, collective traumas that extended beyond the case of David himself. Importantly, their group is marked by more heterogeneity than an average sample of Banjalukans, including Muslims and Roma. It also includes a significant number of pensioners, and thus, a significant shift from the youth-dominated protests of the movements’ beginnings in 2018.

I realized that even among my leftist and anti-Dodik interlocutors, the majority found this group either foolish to keep fighting against what they saw as a gridlocked and unchangeable system, or as unfaithful to the movement's original, "pure" goal of obtaining a fair trial for David's murder. This held true even for younger generations whose ideology on issues such as gender and sexual orientation, anti-nationalism, etc. motivated them to participate in demonstrations on March 8 for women's rights, to partake in "multicultural" events, and to work for or volunteer with Banja Luka's youth NGOs. It became clear that the word "political" in the Bosnian context is a dirty one, and that the Pravda activists' decision to register an NGO in Vienna, and later to form a political party in Banja Luka in the hopes of gaining seats in the legislature, meant for most hypocrisy, rather than a genuine desire to expand their anti-corruption and anti-violence aims. During the discussion with Milan T. about the "underworld" (see chapter one), he rendered a narrative I heard many times over about the "politicization" of *Pravda*:

"I believe a lot of people are put off because it got political on their end. I believe that was a mistake. The protesters got political. They were saying things against the ruling party, which is not bad per se, but they did it in a political way. They did a disservice to themselves by doing that because they just aggravated all the people who are for SNSD. The murder fell in a whole different light when it became political."

Like many other friends of mine, Milan firmly believed that the protests would have lasted longer at a larger scale had they not been "screwed over by the opposition party rulers who said they would support them, then backed off." After I inquired why so many people including Milan were put off by politics, he said, "I won't be involved if it's political, no fucking way, it won't happen. Protests for a dead child, if you're gonna spew your political bullshit, I'm not gonna be there." This agitated response softened slightly when the conversation turned to Davor and Suzana:

"I'm positive the parents didn't intend anything politically but they just got dragged into it. I believe that's super draining and you're super not in a good place when that happens to you. You're super liable to all kinds of spinsters, and I believe they got dragged in. They're not alone in this. A lot of people who tried to make a stand got screwed over."

Milan's empathy for David's parents existed simultaneously alongside his refusal to protest for a fair trial for their son's murder, and interestingly, centered on their supposed susceptibility to politicians. As I will expand upon in chapter three, Milan's view and the view of many Banjalukans brands political persuasion of any kind an "extension from injustice, indecency,

greed, dirtiness, and corruption” (Hromadžić, 2015, p.112). As Elissa Helms has noted, it is put often, and bluntly, that *politika je kurva* or “politics is a whore” (Helms, 2008b). Against the “immoral force of *politika*,” the counter-force of being among the *pošteni ljudi* or “decent, honest, straightforward people” arises as the only alternative, which I will elaborate upon in chapter three (Kolind, 2007, p. 127 & Kolind, 2008, p. 135).

Given the deeply entrenched realities of corruption I have explained in chapter one, it is not surprising that Milan and many others could not imagine a movement free from corrupt entanglements. As I mentioned previously about his desire to see Dodik’s regime fall, he assured me, “People should be protesting here everyday.” However, he also assured me that “that’s a whole different problem” unrelated for him to *Pravda za Davida*.

Two of my former students, twenty-five-year-old twins who identify themselves as counter-culture and critical of the state, even spoke against David himself, skeptical that he should be lauded as a hero. Having consumed the state-sanctioned and thus anti-*Pravda* news, and perhaps more significantly, adopted to the reigning theories of the town’s gossip, they said that David had fancied himself a “gangster” and that it was excessive pride that had pushed him to investigate government secrets—one of the rumors circulating as a potential cause behind the police murder. As I heard from many other youth, they asked why David should be the face of the movement when other victims of dubious acts of violence were unfortunately aplenty in the region. Furthermore, they were scoffed at the remaining *Pravdaši*, saying that they merely needed “something to do” or something that gave them a sense of significance and “power.” Still, one brother shook his head and said it was the “saddest news in years” and “these are dark times,” acknowledging the moral failure of the murder, yet still skeptical of those who spoke against it.

Doubts in the current state of the *Pravda* movement were also reflected in former *Pravda* activists, especially the youth. Maja Jović and Emilija Zebić, both 23 years old, volunteered their deepest emotions to me regarding the loss of their friend David, and the time they spent with the *Pravda* movement. Emilija was particularly prominent in the first protests, and described herself to me as David’s best friend. Dreadlocks still peeked out from the bottom of her ponytail, and she proudly explained that they were David’s creations from years past.

Both Maja and Emilija described themselves as part of the first twelve *Pravda* activists. As Emi put it, this original group funded the speakers, microphones, and banners with their own money. “We stood there with our hearts...and the other people were looking for something that they can grab in all of that, besides that child’s body. That’s the problem.” For more than a year, both

suffered an ongoing trauma of surveillance; police would follow Maja, who lived close to the square, to her home, and Emilija changed her phone number five times in one year for fear of her messages being monitored.

But their pride of being part of this original group was palpable. Emma reflected after telling these stories, “I don’t want to stop my life because someone’s watching me. I don’t give a fuck. Kill me if you want...What happened with Pravda never happened on our country, or on Balkan, ever.”

After Davor fled to Austria in the wake of the December 25 Bloody Christmas protest, Emilija and Maja felt lost, and saw a certain dissolution of their original group. When they watch the current group gather on Facebook live, they had a feeling that some of the current members were “hiding” during the original, and in their view, most dangerous of the protests. The ritualistic aspect of the Pravda gatherings after Davor’s exit were for them,

“maybe *navik* (habit). One part is habit, another part is *inat* (spite). They’re going to be there forever, but they don’t understand. They weren’t there, they don’t really know what happened, you know. They just feel, but the feeling is lost. It’s like it only becomes a habit of your life. And rage against the government...Now it’s not really what we had. When I watch the live at 6:00 when they gather behind the church, they’re still doing that, but there are 15 people, and from that 15 people, five are young. Ten people are old people. When we were there, there were mostly young people.”

While they shared much of the public’s view that the movement lost sight of its original goal in favor of a “political” goal, it was clear that Emilija and Maja mostly decry the loss of youth in the protest, who might, from an identitarian perspective, better represent David Dragicević “and all the children of Bosnia and Herzegovina”—the tagline of Pravda’s NGO in Vienna. For these original protesters, the loss of the protests’ high octane start was very much a product of the younger generation’s anger, and had by now been lost along with Davor’s leadership position for *Pravda* in Banja Luka, and moreover, by each year’s increasing emigration of young people in search of education or employment abroad.

Sofija Grmuša, a 34-year-old activist from Banja Luka also held a prominent role in *Pravda* since its inception. But her involvement never wavered, instead increasing as the group of remaining activists—who refer to themselves as the *Pravdaši*—lessened in number. Our first meeting was on a sweltering afternoon at K.S.E.T. pub, where she assured me that the waitstaff supported *Pravda* and she felt free to speak. As many cigarette butts stacked in the ash tray, and our

conversation danced between political and personal life, I knew it was the beginning of a genuine friendship. I could see from her statements on the movement, but also from her overall demeanor—unwaveringly direct and honest—that her view of the worthwhileness of the movement differed from the naysayers. She assured me that their detraction sprang primarily from fear. “People are afraid here because they don’t understand that this country is our country—it’s not from them. We are making the rules, not them.”

After Davor Dragičević, Sofija is the public face of Pravda, along with Ozren Perduv, president of the Pravda za Davida political party *Put Pravde* or “The Way of Justice” and Miljan Kovać, president of the Banja Luka branch of the *Pravda za Davida* NGO. Throughout my time with the Pravda activists, I always watched in awe as Sofija prepared herself to give a statement to the press. Often, her hands shook as grasped a piece of paper on which she had carefully prepared her speech. Every time afterwards she told me after how scared she had been. The more I got to know her character, I realized that she, more than anyone I’d met, embodied the adage that courage is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to act in spite of fear.

What I knew of Sofija before our meeting came from videos of her handing flowers in a mocking fashion to the policemen surrounding Pravda protests. As Tupac, a well-loved rapper in Banja Luka, played at K.S.E.T., I listened to Sofija’s story, starting from April 24, 2018, the day that she traveled from Switzerland, where she’d been living with her sister, to Banja Luka to join the fight for David’s justice. “I was shocked and felt like I must do something, I must go stay with the parents, I must stay there on the square, I must be there with them. And I left, I had a boyfriend there, but I left everything and just decided. I have something that I like to fight for justice, something inside me.”

Sofija feels that most people who doubt Davor or the movement’s legitimacy lost the strength to fight, and don’t see a resolution. In contrast, for those who remain,

“We still have that strength and faith that we are gonna come to justice for David, and that we will do that because of all that happened with us, the activists, with everyone. It gave us more and more power to fight against them because we know we are on the side of the truth and we know that we are doing something good....I don’t want to begin something if I don’t finish. And I think it’s worth it for David, to fight. And it’s not just a fight for David, it’s a fight for everyone. It’s for others’ future, not for my future. We are fighting for the people. But people here, they don’t recognize that. They are just afraid, scared, I don’t know.”

The remaining group of *Pravda* activists faced significant differential treatment by the police, culminating in a lawsuit in the constitutional court of Bosnia and Herzegovina against the police officers as well as the entire entity of *Republika Srpska* for discrimination. For instance, by police preference rather than law, the group is sometimes arrested for holding pictures of David, or even for standing alone at the square. Sofija managed to record several instances in which she is waiting for a friend, or getting a coffee with one other *Pravda* activist, and the police force her to move. Even the group's efforts to light candles for David were deterred.

Sofija voiced that the view in general society, as well as of the activists who left *Pravda*, that the movement became ineffectual and/or overly politicized, comes from misinformation, and a narrative promoted by the state. She explained that beyond the daily gatherings streamed on Facebook live, where the group shows a cheery demeanor, lies the aforementioned constant discrimination, not to mention the inability to find work. At the point of our coffee, Sofija had been rejected for every job she had applied to since she came back from Switzerland; most Banjalukans fear association even with her name. Also, they face the fallout of police discrimination in the form of trials, or regularly attending their own or their fellow activists' trials, which at least, Sofija says, the judge usually rejects. And lastly, the maintenance of their NGO faced institutional blockages including a refusal by all banks in Banja Luka to sponsor their account until Raiffeisen hesitantly agreed.

In spite of and because of struggle, the group maintained a camaraderie that, in direct contradiction with the homogenetic narrative of *Republika Srpska*, celebrated its diversity. "There are older people, Muslims, with us, there are Roma, I don't know, there is no difference between us, we know our way. We don't see the difference in the nationality and that was on the beginning like that. One tragedy connected all of us and affected all of us. And it hurt us a lot. I knew [David.]. But people who didn't know him still care." Sofija also spoke in a more optimistic manner than Emilija and Maja about the groups' status in Banjalukan society. "People see that we are still protesting, that we are still fighting. So much time and they don't give up, that means something. Mostly if I walk through the street I don't feel that people hate me or something, I feel respect. I feel like they see hope not just in me, but in us. They just can't stand with us. They are not so brave." I would see this throughout the following year I spent with the *Pravdaši* as I watched people's eyes follow us, whether simply crossing the road, or engaged in definitive protest.

At the end of our coffee, Sofija told me that she had never told so many details to any journalist. They usually followed her after a protest or an arrest, when she was too harried to discuss the

vulnerable aspects of her life in Pravda. It became clear that a method of empathy was the only way to engage with a case that had so thoroughly reshaped not only Bosnian society, but also the lives of all who continued to fight for David. Sofija wondered why I had not met her sooner, and invited me to stand with them near the Church the following evening.

That evening marked the beginning of my regular ritual of joining these daily gatherings, first in front of the Church and later when the ban was lifted, at the main square. It was the night I first met Lidija Matić, a friend of Sofija's who had also been involved since the movement's beginning. Working as a cleaner during the day, she gave the rest of her time to Pravda, working closely with Ozren and Sofija and communicating regularly with Davor from his exile in Vienna. When Sofija called Lidija over, she bounded up to me eagerly and led me by the arm to meet the others. The gathering had a distinctively informal quality, even after Sofija started the Facebook live broadcast, watched regularly by supporters in other parts of Bosnia or abroad. She always started the broadcast with "Dobro veće dobri ljudi," or, "good evening good people," a phrase that Davor also used when he posted videos from Vienna. Commonly heard in Bosnia, the phrase "*dobri ljudi*" suggests an overall willingness to be a moral actor and to offer help; in addressing the Pravda supports, then, the meaning extended beyond solidarity to the cause (Kolind, 2008; Brković, 2017). While the gathering included official commentary from Sofija and Ozren, its value also lied clearly in its function as an embodied meeting of people who had suffered the same fate of being at various points silenced and detained, yet held on to the same dream of righting the injustice of David's death. The humor and congeniality of these "*dobri ljudi*" could be seen in their willingness to discuss daily life and problems; at each gathering, I watched the mood flit abruptly between a joyful murmur of conversations and a reverent silence, especially when its end was marked by a communal singing of David's song:

Izgleda da neću daleko stići/

jer sam ja samo još jedan pijun u ovoj priči/

Ne idem nigdje, načinio sam štetu/

ja sam samo još jedan klinac u getu

It looks like I'm not gonna get away/

Because I'm just another peon in this story/

I'm not going anywhere, I've done the damage/

I'm just another kid in the ghetto

After that first 6:00 pm gathering, I settled into a very crowded café for pandemic times, and felt for what would be the first of many times the eyes of waiters and other customers on our backs. But the state spectre usually shrunk away in the presence of the *Pravdaši*, who cared less than anyone in Banja Luka if I took part, recorded them, or committed their true thoughts to paper. I myself, in contrast, avoided the live stream, afraid of exposure and surveillance. But I would eventually not so much as notice when the camera fell on me, and raise my fist in solidarity as I joined in the singing of David's song.

After the gathering, I went with Sofija, as well as Lidija Matić and Jelena Marjanović, for drinks in one of the side alleys of the *gospoška ulica* or pedestrian street of the city at "Café Vienna," whose name itself nodded to the Viennese branch of *Pravda* and to the widespread emigration of Bosnians to Vienna. Lidija, who worked during the day as a cleaner and tirelessly for *Pravda* in the evenings, enthusiastically gestured me towards an empty seat, and insisted that I go for a night out soon with her and Sofija. Jelena Marjanović, a central activist in the movement who usually lived in Vienna, took special interest in me, asking me about the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S. along with the common question of why I would ever come to Bosnia. She explained how NGOs had failed to help *Pravda za Davida*, citing their entrenchment in various funding structures and thus external influence as the reason. The same had been true of the U.S. Embassy branch office in Banja Luka, which sometimes sent representatives to their annual "international *Pravda* media conference," but failed to take concrete action. But eventually, she noticed that Sofija and Lidija were focusing more on private matters and gossip. She smiled at me over her cigarette and nodded to the two of them talking at the other side of the table.

"They are talking about love, about relationships. Stories. You know, we are always talking about that. You all in the U.S., maybe you have a couple friends. Maybe you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend, but that's it. We have so much more. We are a nation of love."

Jelena's words echoed in my head for years, through the covid pandemic and through countless examples of the informal solidarities of everyday people. As I will explain further in chapters 3 and 4, her sentiment underlies not only *Pravda za Davida*, but also the ways in which everyday people navigate life on "the bridge."

2. 3 Politics of hope

In January 2021, I headed towards *Davidovo srce* or “David’s heart” at the riverbed on the 900th day of protest. I followed a sign spray painted on a concrete slab with an arrow, and walked towards the gathering. With only 15-20 people present, it felt at once solemn and full of laughter, as was always the case. An alternate meeting spot to the main square, David’s heart was situated where the *Crkvena* and *Vrba*s rivers met—the site where David’s body was found. The *Pravdaši* often changed the decor of the heart, whether by choice to mark milestones in the movement, or by force when the police destroyed their handiwork. Situated away from the center of Banjaluka—unlike David’s square—the heart was still marked by an ongoing spatial battle between the state and the protesters. Just as the police had forcefully removed the heart on the main square during the Bloody Christmas protest in December 2018, they kept the memorial at the mouth of Vrba in a state of constant threat, even issuing an official demand in the spring of 2019 for the creators of the heart to remove it as soon as possible. Just as the police regularly cited the violation of covid regulations as a roundabout way of limiting the protesters’ actions, i.e., the protesters failing to wear masks or abide by social distancing, the authorities justified their demand to remove the heart by stating that the protesters did not receive approval to plant flowers or leave objects on city grounds (“Naredbna: Uklonite ‘Davidovo srce,’” 2019).

This time, the heart had around it several books whose central theme was social critique, including 1984. Sofija was nervous to talk to the press, but knew them well at this point—even this part of the gathering had become ritual. Lidija immediately asked, “Why are you alone?!” and called me over. I joined in the usual singing of the song and raised fists, and then watched Sofija and Ozren’s televised interview. I saw David’s grandmother wipe a tear away, and abruptly after, Goga, a pensioner with short, cropped hair and an electric personality, turned our attention to a man in a white dress shirt and black pants across the river, who seemed to be surveying us. Everyone seemed to know who he was and explained to me that that he was probably a spy for the state. Goga and a few of the older women laughed and waved their hands, calling in a taunting tone, “Lukač! Lukač!”, the name of the Minister of Interior of Republika Srpska chiefly responsible for spreading lies about David’s death. He didn’t react. What struck me the most was that no one was afraid, even moments later when Ozren explained to everyone how someone familiar with him as a public figure and against his politics had robbed his house that week. In retaliation to the environment of surveillance, we all agreed to get coffee at the café across from the main police station, in order to provoke them on purpose—a kind of dance that would happen frequently, even in jokes with policemen who semi-regularly arrested Sofija. Not out of fear, but because Sofija and Ozren knew when and how to make a

performance of our group or to be subtle, we walked in small groups set apart by several meters towards the cafe. I walked with Sofija and Ozren, and could feel the arresting aura of their courage combined with the sunlight bouncing off of Vrbas on our faces. When we came out of the wooded path and met the congested traffic of the crosswalk on *gradski most* (city bridge), I could feel all eyes on us. As Sandra once told me, “Everyone knows they are doing something right, even if they cannot say that they agree.” Sofija too, often reminded me, “We know everyone and they know us.”

I had a *rakija* and coffee with Sofija at our table, while the others raised a glass in cheers from theirs. The waiter was especially kind, as I saw most waiters behave toward the *Pravdaši*. We all glanced across the street at the police department as we sipped, and Sofija simply laughed, saying, “All police are idiots, part of a mafia, and war criminals. They are always at the café near David’s square. They do nothing, only watching, or waiting.”

In the fall of 2020, the Pravda activists found a way to return to their original meeting point at the main square for the first time in 22 months. After livestreaming a march from the monument on *Banj Brdo* hill—which honors the *Krajina* region’s fallen soldiers from World War II and signifies liberation—towards the main square, they sung David’s song in unison, ecstatic to reclaim the square where so much of their history had come to pass, from Davor sleeping in a tent in an act of civil disobedience prior to his exile, to Bloody Christmas, to countless arrests. Their solution was to run in the 2020 municipal elections via their registered political party, *Pokret Pravde*, the movement of justice, which would grant them the right to campaign on the main square alongside all other parties vying for seats in the legislature. While Sofija had explained to me that this move was necessary for *Pravda za Davida* to merely continue existing on the ground, I soon saw that it was risky for public perception of the movement’s authenticity. As several scholars have noted, “politics” has become a dirty word in the region, signifying an arena of self-interest and corruption regardless of ideology (Greenburg, 2014; Hromadzic, 2015). Several of my friends outside of *Pravda* lamented its move “from the informal to the formal,” including those who had supported it in the past. But as we moved into election season, one could easily see from the ground on the square the stark contrast between the *Pravda* group’s homemade posters and fuzzy bluetooth speaker audio, and the glossy media of well-funded parties, which underneath all the shine were only offshoots of Dodik’s SNSD (Alliance of Independent Social Democrats) party with different names.

On a bright day in October, I joined their rickety table, self-conscious of my public involvement but immediately made to feel safe in their company. Gusts of wind knocked over our pyramidal

cardboard sign, which we eventually fixed by flanking it on either side with our bags, feeling proud of our craftsmanship even as well manufactured stands dotted the rest of the square and vied for the attention of passersby. David's face, emblazoned on every sign and sticker, looked out at us from behind a pair of shades and a frame of dreadlocks. I first met my friend Brana, a pharmacist in her mid-40s originally from Belgrade, while trying to right the sign. Her shock of red hair glistened in the sun as she explained to a passerby that the party was about more than just David's death, but also against the ruling party's false promises. Over the blare of crumbling resistance rap played on the party's aging speaker, she explained that she had worked with *Pravda* since the very beginning, and contrasted it with her past activism in Serbia. "People in Banja Luka don't know they can stand up. There's apathy, and they are afraid. But we are willing to sacrifice no matter what happens." After her comment on the dire lengths to which the activists were willing to go, she smiled and nodded towards Aleksandra, another *Pravdaši*, who was dancing and laughing with the others. "She has been much happier since one homeopathic remedy I gave her." Brana would come to teach me about her homeopathic remedies and join me in my hobby of reading tarot cards, over which we'd regularly ask the fates whether *Pravda* (justice) would ever come to light.

In stark contrast to the other stands on the square, where people of a homogenous age sporting crisp fashion with ironed collars sat down and unenthusiastically finished their shift, a lightness marked the *Pravda* stand. The *Pravdaši* were certainly set apart from the broader "people" Brana referred to, singing along unabashedly to Bob Marley and songs of support written specifically for the *Pravda* movement, despite the lower volume and inferior sound quality to that of the other parties' stands. Even their diverse demographics, as the group included pensioners, Muslims, the disabled, and a few teenagers, stood in contrast to that of the other parties'. This was indeed part of the reason that they accepted me without question, while many other parties would have assumed me a spy, or at least made a point of my Soros-funded CEU association.

One man passed on a bicycle and muttered expletives at us, but my friends only laughed and managed to secretly put a flier for *Pokret Prande* in his back pocket when he got stuck behind the crowds. Even passing police were fodder for a kind of game; they all joked about one policeman in particular who smiled at Sofija and who, they claimed, had had a crush on her for ages. I recalled Jelena's sentiment of "a nation of love"—a place characterized by hate on a macrocosmic level yet brimming with interpersonal connection on the ground.

As Ozren noted of campaigning on the square in one Facebook post:

“Today’s impression of the day: A lady came closer and I asked her if she wanted to take an election flyer for *Pokret Pravde*. Her question was, ‘Are there any cameras?’ When I said, I don’t think so, she took the flyer. Yesterday’s impression of the day: I am standing on the square next to the stand of *Pokret Pravde* and a lady passes by me... They turn towards me and ask me with a serious tone, ‘How much does the west pay you?’ I didn’t manage to tell her, ‘a lot.’”

Still, the naysayers could not manage to break the *Pravdaši*’s spirit. Nina Ivić, who owned a small boutique in the center of Banja Luka joined Sofija, Lidija, and Ozren as one of the most involved *Pravdaši*. Her dramatic false eyelashes framed her kind eyes as she explained that the reason behind their spirit was that the other parties’ representatives were “only there for their job” but the *Pravdaši* were “there for their hearts.” While the creation of *Pokret Pravde* in August 2019 was born from the main goal of the *Pravda za Davida* “association” now registered in Vienna—“Justice for David and All the children of Bosnia and Herzegovina”—the municipal elections gave *Pokret Pravde* a chance to expand upon and to publicly enumerate other goals, including resistance against corruption, populism, the censure of intellectuals, and the demagoguery of political figures. Of course, after countless provocations by the police for even their informal gathering as friends, the *Pravdaši* especially highlighted fair treatment under the law and the halting of police brutality in their campaign.

Towards the end of the day of campaigning, Boro, a middle-aged man in an electric wheelchair plastered with *Pravda za Davida* stickers, was one of the last *Pravdaši* at the stand. When asked why he was running as a candidate in the legislature for *Pokret Pravde*, he replied simply that “it is all for the heart. *Idemo do kraja* (we will go until the end)!” and gestured towards the general ambiance of a few *Pravdaši* dancing and singing behind him. *Idemo do kraja*, the main slogan of the movement, manifested itself on that day. As irrational as it was to hope for success while standing amongst the sturdier booths of SNSD and its affiliates, it was almost as if the irrationality itself lent credence to their cause, as per the “politics of disappointment” which hangs as much on success as it does on failures.

2.4 Politics of mourning

This irrationality was only made greater by the fact that many expected the elections to be deterred by the power of SNSD; on top of the phenomena of fear that kept many in government positions from voting against the party, the possibility of election fraud always remained a means of keeping power in the event of an upset. Unfortunately, the expected results came rather than

affirmation of the “irrational” hope. With 2,103 votes, *Pokret Pravde* was left with less than the required number of votes to win representation in parliament. Official statements by Ozren emphasized that their battle was one without infrastructure and with minimal finances and media coverage, yet they still achieved a significant result, one that was greater even than some established political parties, and that all “*dobri ljudi*” (“good people”) were welcome to join. But some of the Pravda members told me—preferring that I don’t connect this sentiment with their name—that this loss significantly affected the morale of the *Pravdaši* as a whole. “I am heartbroken, but the dust is settling,” an anonymous informant told me. “Still, everyone wants to blame someone.”

The election of Draško Stanivuković of the Party of Democratic Progress or PDP for mayor gave some hope to Banjalukans dissatisfied with Dodik’s SNSD party. A member of an at least symbolically opposition party, Draško was younger and more liberal than his opponent Igor Radojičić of SNSD. The *Pravdaši* explained to me that in December 2018, Draško protested for Pravda, and was even injured in the “Bloody Christmas” clash between Pravda protesters and the police and afterwards detained. For this reason, in the wake of their own loss in the municipal elections, some of the *Pravdaši* found a sense of hope in Draško’s win. Just three days after the municipal election, Draško stated publicly that Pravda za Davida should be acknowledged for both directly and indirectly “participat[ing] in the change that took place in Banja Luka,” (Milojević 2020). And about one month later, he joined a march marking their one thousandth day of protest which, against public expectation, proceeded peacefully.

Nonetheless, for many of the *Pravdaši*, trust in Draško remained reticent; even his involvement in Bloody Christmas raised theories that he was using the *Pravda* movement to promote his eventual mayoral political campaign. David’s mother Suzana in particular had long doubted his sincerity, publicly calling him and the opposition “scum” in June of 2019. Still, Ozren publicly thanked Draško for his participation in the march and, along with the other *Pravdaši*, watched with a tenuous eye to see if his support for the group would remain throughout the term. Over a coffee with Brana, she explained to me that she doesn’t trust Draško because he is rich, and even his ability to run a well-financed campaign means that to a greater or lesser extent, his nomination has the approval of the reigning party—SNSD. “You see how these people deal with it? They would just kill him.” She continued, swirling her coffee with a spoon, “But the sad thing now is that we need Draško.” At least, Brana and I concluded, he had stated that no inspection (of public grounds) would be permitted to remove *Davidovo srce*, the makeshift heart memorial for David at the creek of the *Crkvena* and *Vrbaš* rivers.

While it would prove true that official inspectors would halt their onslaught of fines regarding the *Pravdaši*'s use of public space for the heart memorial, the litany of bureaucratic attacks against the group would continue. Moreover, the call for a just police force, so central to their campaign, came up short; what might have been a hope for greater protection dwindled into a hope for less attacks. On the level of seeking justice for David's murder, prosecutors continued to do nothing about the charges filed against the police officers, and on the level of seeking justice for the *Pravdaši* themselves, police officers continued to deprive the group of their liberty by marking even informal gatherings as "protests" during which they could be haphazardly arrested, especially by appealing to breaches of covid measures as a convenient means of silencing.

The day after a police raid of the bar where I'd been the night before (which I will detail in the following chapter) I got a text from Sofija informing me that the next day was David's birthday, and that they would start the memorial from 4 p.m. As things usually went, I did not know any details ahead of time, and I was not prepared, whether logistically or emotionally. But I answered her text with a thank you, a yes, I will join, and a heart. The next morning, I realized I was dissociating during a call with my friend abroad, and suspected that my body was trying to disentangle the fears of the police raid from the ambient fears of surveillance each time I joined the *Pravdaši*. Still, I steeled myself as I prepared—late—to join David's commemorations. As often happened, I did not know if I could face even Sofija, my friend, or Goga, the pensioner and loyal *Pravdaši*, who told me she'd be there; Goga always blinded me with her strength and goodness—as if her compassion was too bright to look at directly. And so, I put on some makeup and my black cap, figured illogically that the cap would be warm enough, and decided against a scarf. I began to trudge through the snow towards David's heart, where his body was found. I decided that the path near the river Vrbas was the quickest way, but soon discovered that it was muddy and swampy. As I passed two fishermen in between the fortress *kastel* and the river sporting tall galoshes, I felt their eyes on me, and began the familiar line of thought: I wondered if they are wondering if I am going to David's heart. I also felt the familiar gaze upon me of concern, because I was not dressed warmly enough—I should have worn the scarf. I was the foreign-looking woman who was risking her health and becoming dirty. Perhaps even my boots should not be this dirty, sinking into the cold, wet earth.

I arrived to see everyone already gathered, barely making some characters out through the falling snow, huddled under their umbrellas. I saw Vladan, one of the most vocal activists, recording behind a video camera, and tried to mirror his resolve. I saw Sofija go down to speak to the

television reporters. And I saw a woman I do not know wiping tears from her eyes, while her friend approached to offer a tissue.

I pieced together most of the recorded prayers in Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian, some in a man's voice, and the others in a child's voice spoken over a melancholic piano melody. The lyrics discussed how David would have finished faculty by now, how he would have worked on a great IT project, how he would have made more music. Sofija caught my eye from across the crowd, and her face lit up as she waved. It felt how it can feel at a funeral, where moments of lightness marked the gloom in intervals. After making her rounds, Sofija made her way towards me and embraced me, hard. I asked how she has been, and she could only answer "Well, heavy days." In Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian, the word for difficult and heavy are the same. Not knowing what else to say, I could only answer, "I believe you." We started to round up to go to David's old house, and Sofija asked Ozren if it's okay if I go with him. He was frazzled organizing all the rides, but nodded with a short, "Of course." I found Slaven, just seventeen, who offered me some relief, in his light spirit and desire to practice English. "I was afraid I would not see you again after the conference last summer. I'm glad I was wrong!" He told me about his plans to go to US with his best friend, and told me he had never told anyone else about it. He seemed surprised to be sharing his dreams, as if in spite of himself.

On the way to the car, Stela who like Brana, had been with *Pravda* since the beginning, fell in the ice-ridden mud, and lay there for a moment while half of us looked on. The other half had already gone towards the cars. I didn't know whether to or how to help and watched as everyone asked Stela to try bending her arms, to see if she was injured. After confirming she could bend them, she wiped away an odd mixture of tears and snow. Vladan caught my eye and shook his head, as if to say, this is too much for today. The snow fell all around us and we occasionally shook it off our umbrellas, revealing our previously hidden faces. Slaven and I spoke half Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian, half English, in the car as he told me of his plans to move to U.S. and asked me if I knew how. Goga laughed at us from the front seat and said, "Speak Serbian so Ozren and I can understand everything!" We zoomed up the hills of the neighborhood *Laoš* towards David's former house. I wondered in this moment, and several times throughout the day, why I felt at home in a car spiralling uphill through icy streets to that house, squished next to Duška who I had not even been introduced to yet. Upon arrival, we could only chain smoke and fall into the occasional joke—the tools we kept to keep going.

I wasn't sure where to stand in David's front yard, conscious of obstructing others' view. Eventually the reporters caught up to us, and set up their cameras and microphones somewhat clumsily amidst the solemnity of the event. The snow kept covering the picture of David's face on the plaque in front of the house. I watched as Nina's hand with its perfect nails and ring-adored fingers wiped the snow away with such care and thoroughness that you might imagine she touched David's forehead itself.

We sang David's song again, the fourth or fifth time over the course of that ceremony. But no one grew tired of the words.

At the end, Slaven and I waited for Duška, Ozren, and Goga, and climbed into the car in with them to zoom back into the city. Our frozen toes thawed as we moved to the last location. At our final site, the main square or *Davidov Trg*, we gathered to warm up at the nearby City Cafe, where we had been a few months prior during the campaign. There they energetically planned the scripts for the news spot, despite the sadness of the day. Sofija casually put her arm around me. It felt familial, and the same energy of the campaign shone through, its mission and its purpose reflected in the community of *Pravdaši* themselves. Again, it felt like a funeral, with a sense of peace suddenly taking over futility and loss. I saw two policemen watching us from some two hundred meters away, where my friend Sladja's mom sells cigarettes, but they did not intervene. Slaven and I took some videos of Sofija cutting helium balloons, one for each year of David's birthday, and watched them drift towards the clouds.

I found out a few days later that the two policemen watching us had targeted *Pravda* participants for not wearing a covid mask at the square, and instrumentalized this to issue a fine. This trend continued in the coming days, when Ozren and others from *Pravda* were targeted on the pedestrian street for mask violations while several others passed by with bare faces. It seemed that the earlier doubts that the *Pravdaši* would be safer under Draško's leadership were unfortunately warranted.

In the most alarming case of insecurity, a hand grenade was found at David's heart memorial—a place where we had all gathered many times under the illusion of safety. While police did remove the grenade and place yellow caution tape around the memorial's periphery, this instance of (even potential) direct violence threw my perception of the space into a tailspin. Many times I had contrasted the quiet of David's heart with buzz of central Banja Luka, where one inevitably comes across acquaintances, exchanges gossip, and lacks the sense of solitude within which to reflect. Especially for the *Pravdaši*, the heart had a function similar to a church—communal, yet bordered from the “everyday” patterns of the city by its setting at the mouth of the *Crkvena* and

*Vrba*s rivers, shielded by the willow trees and disconnected from the road and even the walking path. Above all, it had been a safe place wherein they had confronted their own mourning and the questions that accompany that mourning. As Judith Butler has commented, the affect of grief becomes political precisely when individual loss and bewilderment moves into a collective commitment to action. While some have approached grief as something that must first be overcome in order to begin political action, Butler's definition of grief is far more suited to *Pravda za Davida*:

“To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself. The disorientation of grief-“Who have I become?” or, indeed, “What is left of me?” “What is it in the Other that I have lost?”- posits the “I” in the mode of unknowingness. But this can be a point of departure for a new understanding if the narcissistic preoccupation of melancholia can be moved into a consideration of the vulnerability of others” (Butler, 2020, p. 30)

Related to Sara Ahmed's theory of social emotions (that I have touched upon in Chapter 1), Butler affirms here that while much of grief—and perhaps its starting point—is individual, its evolution into empathy for another renders it political. The *Pravdaši*'s collective mourning and honoring of David reached a fever pitch in the widespread protests of 2018 and 2019, and lurched again in their brave campaign for *Pokret Pravde*. But while both of these examples offer undeniable evidence of the “political” by aiming towards an imagined future, the gatherings at David's heart have their own political import, creating a space in which pain becomes shared.

The grenade at David's heart shook me for the obvious reason that on another day, it could have killed one of us. But it was also the entrance of a *symbol* of hatred into the sacred gathering space of the heart that perturbed me—its interruption of the necessary, and deeply political, process of grieving.

2.5 Affect as an opening for political action across ethnic lines

Nonetheless, the grenade incident did not slow the movement down, and the *Pravdaši* continued their battle despite of and in spite of continued harassment by the police. In June, I joined Sofija and the others on *Davidov Trg* to watch a concert celebrating the police force of *Republika Srpska*. The spectacle was as one might expect, littered with nationalist paraphernalia and R.S. flags. But more striking than the visuals were the sounds, which fell into two camps: the pro-Serb songs amplified by the speakers, and shouts of “Pravda za Davida!” coming from the *Pravdaši*, who

took advantage of the momentary silence in between each song to raise their voices. “I am full of adrenaline,” Sofija told me, her face intermittently lit up by the concert visuals. “The policemen are telling us that the organizers of the show are complaining but so what? I know the policemen very well.”

A celebratory mood reigned because, as Sofija and Ozren explained to me, the Bosnian Constitutional Court—presiding over both the Federation and *Republika Srpska*—upheld the appeal that Davor filed following David’s murder. This confirmed the message that *Pravda za Davida* had tried to publicize since the very beginning—that a true investigation of David’s murder had yet to take place. The Constitutional Court accepted that the investigation had been delayed more than one hundred days in an attempt to obstruct legal proceedings. Moreover, they confirmed that evidence from surveillance cameras had been seized and tampered with, as had physical evidence, including David’s clothes.

Davor’s attorney, Ifet Feraget, represented the appeal to the Constitutional Court. His advocacy for *Pravda za Davida* exists still alongside his advocacy for *Pravda za Dženana*, a movement surrounding the death of Dženan Memić, a 22-year-old who died from head trauma after being struck by a vehicle in Sarajevo. The former Sarajevo Chief Prosecutor Dalida Burzić assembled an indictment claiming that Dženan was struck by the vehicle accidentally. But as in David’s case, the Memić family suspects the prosecutor of mishandling information surrounding Dženan’s death, which they believe to be a murder at the hands of a politically connected person. Dženan’s father Muriz, and of course Ifet, have been key allies for *Pravda za Davida*, both in the formal legal sense and in the activist sense via shared media appearances and nods to one another’s struggles in their rallying cries.

In September of 2021, I woke up before dawn and got ready to travel with the *Pravdaši* to Sarajevo, where I would attend a mutual protest for justice for Dženan and David. I slipped on a black “*Pravda za Davida*” t-shirt that Sofija had given me and saw the familiar logo of David, his dreads tied back with a bandana, peering at me through his shades in the mirror. I felt proud to don his image each time a car passed me on my path towards the city center, buoyed even as I shivered in the still-cold air of dawn. When I finally got to the bus and the group of *Pravdaši* encircling it, chatty and eager to board, Ozren started to call roll. Slaven wove through the group towards me and asked if I would sit with him. And so, we filed onto the bus behind the others and started southeast towards Sarajevo.

A few kilometers outside of Sarajevo, a police brigade flanked our bus for protection. Everyone discussed the glaring distinction between the Federation police and the R.S. police, who had

blocked the border when diaspora traveling to Banja Luka for *Pravda za Davida* protests had tried to enter. Upon arrival, I stuck mostly with Slaven, as we watched the crowd slowly build to more than one thousand people. Posters from every major city in Bosnia bobbed up and down around us, sporting messages of solidarity and admonishment of the government. One poster signed with a heart from Zenica read, “*Ono što su jučer bili Dženan i David to sutra možemo biti vi ili ja*”—“what Dženan and David were yesterday could be you or I tomorrow.”

Several speakers addressed the tragic fate of the two young men as a product of the corrupt state. Among deafening cheers, Dženan’s father Muraz told the crowds, “Twenty buses came from each end of Bosnia. You all came in the right direction towards Sarajevo today.” Ifet also received thunderous applause after stating “Our children need a new way, our children need new dreams. And only together and only together we can ensure that.” The most stirring message came from Davor’s mother Suzana, who stepped up to the podium without a trace of nervousness. Surveying the crowds, she said, “We have to remind them [the government] every now and then that we are a force they should fear. We are the ones who will drive them from their positions.”

The speeches concluded with a collective recital of David’s song, and a march down Sarajevo’s main street towards the Parliamentary Assembly. Cars passing our collective mass honked in support, suggesting a degree of public acknowledgment and widespread solidarity that the *Pravdaši* had not experienced since 2019. At the end of the march, Slaven and I found our way to Suzana and Sofija, who expressed satisfaction and also surprise, especially regarding the earlier police escort of our bus. Sofija told me that one stop remained on our trip—Dženan’s monument.

The path to Dženan’s monument in *Ilidža*, a neighborhood of Sarajevo, was lined with trees, and many people passed us on their early evening stroll through the park. When we arrived, I was impressed by the unobstructed monument for Dženan, and text inscribed on the surface which read, “When oppression becomes the rule, resistance becomes an obligation.” I thought immediately how its sturdiness and official character contrasted with David’s makeshift heart. What was familiar, however, was the air of sanctity that quieted extraneous thoughts, and the activists’ vacillation between levity and sadness. There was throughout a sense of hope, as many Sarajevans stopped to take pictures with our group, posing with open-mouth smiles as they raised their fists in solidarity. This atmosphere continued on the bus ride back to Banja Luka, where the *Pravdaši* laughed and demanded “*Pravda za pušače!*”, a riff on “*Pravda za Davida!*” meaning “Justice for the smokers!” when the driver waited too long to pull over for a break.

Slaven and I had slunk into the same seats next to each other, and both of us wondered at our fellow *Pravdaši's* sense of triumph and humor. As the bus rolled on to Banja Luka, Slaven and I talked over the chatter and occasional roaring laughs of the others, and our conversation turned to his experiences in high school. I mentioned that my Facebook algorithm kept recommending me a second profile with his name, about which he explained that he has two profiles, one for the *Pravdaši* and one for his peers. He hides his involvement with *Pravda* from his classmates; even if they didn't tease him, he explained, they wouldn't understand his support. Besides that, he explained, "I only trust some people." Because of this, he was shocked by the number of young people at the protest that day; "in Banja Luka, that does not exist," he said as his gaze drifted towards the trees growing dark on side of the highway.

Differences between the level of violence levied against *Pravda za Davida* and *Pravda za Dženana* could be seen in our police escort and in the stark differences between Dženan's monument and David's heart, not to mention his grave exhumed and moved to Vienna (which I will discuss further in the following chapter). However, the hopeful mood coexisting with mourning was constant to both movements, and the memory of David and Dženan alike animates their ability to continue.

Back in Banja Luka, the protest in Sarajevo was met with mixed reviews outside of the *Pravda* circles, including the usual skepticism. Sandra told me how her morning fitness class bubbled with discussions of the protest and overwhelmingly held the opinion that those protesters were paid by the opposition. "Why would anyone go if they were not paid?" they asked Sandra. But a few spoke in support of *Pravda*, including one girl who said that her grandmother's friend who lives in Sarajevo stood throughout the protest and even followed our group down Sarajevo's main street towards the Parliamentary Assembly even though she cannot walk without a cane. Sandra's coach Tanja finally closed the debate with the final word—"Their [the government's] story makes no sense. We can only believe Davor."

As Alice von Bieberstein has commented regarding the commemoration of Hrant Dink, a journalist shot by a nationalist in Istanbul, David and Dženan too are "made to speak from the dead...his body, voice, and spirit [are] animated, kept alive, and his ghost slipped into many bodies" (von Bieberstein, 2017, p.56). Their spirits moved many to mobilize, gather, yell, stand, and sing, and to leave flowers at David's heart on the main square on the first protest, sensing what Lauren Berlant describes as a "moment of a mediating and mediated affect...the 'historical' moment that emerges before it becomes orchestrated into an event or era" (Berlant, 2011, p. 56 as cited in von Bieberstein, 2017). As time evolved from those first moments, the *Pravdaši*

learned how to live without David, but also how to live *with* his memory, through “optimistic attachments to objects that promise endurance, well-being, and prosperity” in the form of “concepts, ways of lives, projects or scenes,” which we see in these spaces of mourning, but especially in relationships of trust and care among the *Pravdaši* (Berlant 2011, as cited in von Bieberstein, 2017). Mourning their loss “encompasses processes of reattachment, and political activism through which such reattachments might get channelled into renewed or altered political commitments” (von Bieberstein, 2017, p.57).

The pan-Bosnian potential of *Pravda za Davida* and *Pravda za Dženana* lies exactly in these affective reattachments, pushing the movements beyond the ethnically-dominated narratives of the past, and rendering them powerful agents for forming a new “battleground” of the people versus the corrupt state. In this chapter, I have focused on the “state” of *Republika Srpska* and the group of committed members of *Pravdaši* who have demonstrated through “typical” actions of protest and campaigning, but also through internal solidarity in the face of adversity, that affective states of hope and mourning can in themselves open possibilities for political action. In choosing to take an anti-teleological approach, I have not defined the success or failure of the movement on a specific political or legal outcome, but on its ability to alter “political commitments” in the minds of all who mourn.

I have chronologically traced my work with the *Pravda za Davida* movement in a period past its apex as a traditionally defined “social movement” with widespread support, and instead one marked by friendship and love, as reiterated by the movement’s own symbols of David’s heart on the square and the heart-shaped memorial at the mouth of the *Crkvena* and *Vrba* rivers. Their affective resistance has become “a sphere of practice where responses to loss can be reworked with a view to possibly reformulating hopes and promises” and holds the potential to transform past ideas surrounding ethnic belonging into a new matrix of the people or trans-ethnic “*narod*” against the state (von Bieberstein, 2017, p.55).

Chapter Three: Whose Corruption? Violence from Above and *Narod* Below

In the previous chapters, we have learned about wider dissatisfaction with Dodik and the insecure structure of *Republika Srpska*, and seen how the *Pravda* movement was one way of coping with the political realities of living under this state. This chapter aims to delineate the ways in which Banjalukans cope with the inconsistent and fraudulent—yet ever-present—state through the embodied and microcosmic practices of everyday life. As my friend Aco said, “There is no state in Bosnia.” The ambivalent existence of the state allows for a sense of “freedom” that Bosnians often contrast with life in the diaspora, as they convey through common adages such as, “You may have money, but you have no time; we have no money, but we have time” or, “Here, everything is possible, and nothing is possible.” The latter statement neatly sums up the dichotomy I postulate in this chapter between forms of violence from “above,” manifested in political corruption and police intimidation, and means of coping with that violence from “below”—which primarily manifests in the resistant potential of community, or, people working together to achieve goals where the state bureaucracy fails. Here, I employ the Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian word *narod*, which literally translates to “nation” but can signal “people” or “citizens” in a transethnic sense beyond the categories of Bosniak, Croat, or Serb. *Narod* here signals the same sense of transethnic “nation” that I have employed in the title of this dissertation, perhaps best explained by Azra Hromadžić as “a space of interconnectedness, morality, economic suffering, and living proximity still lingers and powerfully informs dis-course and practices of ordinary Bosnians-Herzegovinians” (Hromadžić, 2015, p.4). I intertwine this emic concept of *narod* with Čarna Brković’s usage of “social personhood,” which analyzes Bosnians’ use of favors and connections with the understanding that it is more than a coping mechanism (Brković 2017). Rather, it involves a social-moral pursuit that links to concepts of friendship and love underlying the thesis as a whole. This became especially apparent during the covid-19 crisis, which I will explain through several ethnographic examples of the labor of care falling not to the state, but to the “people.”

I begin by offering ethnographic examples of “violence from above” linked to but also outside of the *Pravda za Davida* movement to show how state violence permeates everyday life. I then take up the difficult task of attending to the affects of intimacy, informality, and friendship that often go along with corruption in order to show how these emotions fuel collaboration from “below.” We have seen this duality illustrated in the activism of *Pravda za Davida* itself, characterized by intimacy and informality not only amongst one another, but even by familiar

jokes with the policemen whose names have entered a list of “regular characters” over the years; as they fill formal complaints and drag the activists from the square, they enter what is simultaneously an egregious dismissal of the rights of protesters and a cat-and-mouse game with the *Pravdaši*, the tensions of which are tempered with humor.

In addition to that of Čarna Brković and Azra Hromadžić, I will employ the work of Akhil Gupta and his attention to the narratives surrounding corruption in order to answer to show that the answer to the question “whose corruption?” could be the people or “*narod*,” who subvert top-down corruption by navigating the cracks left in an informal society and in fact become imbued with agency, even as they experience the oppression of an oligarchic state relatively undeterred by the rule of law.

3.1 Violence from above

The violence of the *Republika Srpska* police often came without any warning. One evening after a workout, Dijana, Una, and I scurried to the locker room—our stage for the night-out preparation ritual. I had hijacked the speakers and put on *Grmi* by Mili, a Serbian rapper—the song that Nina always told me was too vile to play during our training session. Our friend Goran popped his head in and chided us, asking “Oh, are you preparing for your jobs on the street tonight?” Still sweaty, but emboldened from weightlifting, we simply laughed and carried on.

We decided to go to *Smuggler's* bar, where the conversation floated between gossip about our coaches, serious advice about love, and whether or not we should take another selfie— but swaying bodies and flashing lights interrupted our every attempt at a picture. I watched Una, a dance instructor, draw circles through the air and move with more confidence than everyone who watched her from the other tables, even though she does not drink. I was under Una's spell, too, when a shout broke through the air and my back straightened to attention. The music stopped. The lights came on, revealing five policemen snaking aggressively between the tables, assuring us, under the odd pretense of “protection,” that there will not be a problem if we do not speak, do not drink, do not so much as remove our palms from the table. And so we stood, as if already guilty, while some of the policemen began the tedious process of checking everyone's IDs, one by one. The remaining policemen continued to pace between us, shining flashlights around our legs. Una and Dijana seemed more angry than scared. I mirrored them, but watched the policemen with an odd mix of hatred and fascination. Some enjoyed their task, or at the very least, found it standard. We watched as they discussed something with the

bartender, able to hear the conversation from afar through the thick silence. They had found one minor, and would fine the bar 200 marks, which I later found out would be taken from the workers' paychecks.

Una caught my eye and whispered, "Do you have ID?" I only had my U.S. driver's license, not my passport, and was left to wait painfully for their reaction to my anomaly. Finally a policewoman approached, grabbed the license from my hand, and asked several times how the card could possibly constitute a *lična karta* or identification card. While I watched her write my name down, I ran quickly through my familiar worst case scenarios and fears of surveillance. A second policeman eventually interrupted my interrogator. "How long has she been here? How does she know Serbian?" Unwilling to explain my true past, and unsure what would help or harm my case, I just said one year. His eyes warmed for a split second, and he asked his colleague to finish writing my information and move on.

Una and Dijana were excused before me, and I tried to follow them outside, but was surprised to be stopped again by the same woman, whose eyes peered at me from above her face mask. She demanded that I remove everything from the purse, and began to look through my belongings, even unscrewing a lip balm and uttering, "Hmm. Labello," in an unexpected moment of humanity. She shone a flashlight into my cigarette box, looking for drugs. Next, my notebooks, where she found sheets of Serbian language practice tucked in, and some translations I did during mine and Sandra's last class. Finally, she demanded that I open and close the two sections of my wallet, frustrated when I did not understand her instructions at first. She was most flummoxed, it seemed, by my Austrian and Hungarian bank cards. Some outdated Austrian and Hungarian residence cards posed the biggest problem, no matter how many times I explained that they were expired. She demanded to know why I claimed to have a U.S. passport and simultaneously these European cards. Her tone grew more militant, and her voice raised, until the same policeman who asked how long I had been in Republika Srpska intervened and said, "It's fine, just finish it," so that she could move along to the next person. It's hard to say whether this was a moment of mercy, or simply his desire to finish the job and go home. I finally reunited with Una and Dijana, after awkwardly saying *hvala* (thanks) and *dovidjenja* (goodbye) to the policewoman, showing gratitude in spite of myself. Una and Dijana seemed more annoyed than traumatized, especially when we walked to Dijana's car in the parking lot and realized that the police had blocked us in with a fleet of their cars. Again, we were stuck, with only the ability to *wait*. I asked Una and Dijana if they had been in this sort of raid before. It was Dijana's first official raid, but not her first witnessing of police intrusions, and Una had been in one in a nearby town. I learned that this time, the police had targeted *Smuggler's* for a reason:

Our friend Milenko from the gym, who owned *Smuggler's*, once tried to resist. They told me that on New Year's Eve, the police came three times, and eventually Milenko became so angry that he refused to turn off the music. Now, they routinely raid *Smuggler's*.

When I arrived home, I wasn't sure what to do, full of adrenaline, a sense of violation, and the sudden resurgence of all of my former fears about surveillance. I felt more aware of locking my door, of where my passport was located, and of my relief at remembering that my residence permit sticker in the passport was valid until February 3rd. I briefly talked on the phone with Sandra, and could see that as with Una and Dijana, the raids were a routinized, ambient, and ever-present trauma in Sandra's life.

I felt the aftereffects of the raid a week later, during a trip to Sarajevo, more aware of my passport in my purs while on the bus, even though I would not cross a border. Once there, settled into a cafe, I wrote field notes about the ugliness of the raid while the customers at the table next to me tried to capture beauty—Sarajevo's city lights twinkling on one by one in the valley spread below us, a technicolor sunset above us. I watched an older man smoking alone ask them to see the photo, and smile and nod with a "*To je dobro.*" It is good.

I spoke with many friends the following week about the police raid. My friend Nina, a 22-year-old cosmetician, said she wanted to study criminology but realized there was no point, because it was all corruption and "nothing was genuine." My old student and friend Andrea, who now lives in Belgrade, told me a story from two years ago in which, during a bar raid, they demanded she unlock her phone. They were perplexed by her possession of two phones, and only stopped harassing her when she said one was for OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), and that she could call them to report their behavior. She caught the eye of on policeman—a boy a few years younger than her that knows her family, and stared him down, realizing he would not act against her if she threatened to report to OSCE. My friends and former flatmates Jelena and Duško also seemed inured to the raids, not so much as raising their eyebrows at my story. Jelena said the raids happened often when she was between sixteen and twenty years old, and marveled that she once believed that it was in the interest of her safety rather than an overreach of state power. According to Sandra, the police enter a state of extraordinary measures during the raids, and have the legal right to violate privacy and go through belongings, as they did mine. In the worst cases, they exercise physical violence against anyone who speaks or moves.

The extra-legal behavior of the police is also mirrored within and among those who do ascribe to the ruling party. My friend's landlord Miroslav Radinković worked with the government of

Republika Srpska for eleven years in the Ministry of Science, until his involvement with *Pravda*, as well as jokes at the expense of the state on his personal Facebook page, changed his life forever. I sat with Miroslav in a café in his neighborhood, half worried about surveillance but calmed by Miroslav's light demeanor as we sipped *rakija* and sunk into his story. He once paused and, looking somewhere beyond me said, "After this conversation, I feel I've just been in a political rally or something." My familiar fears only crept in once when Miroslav barely glanced to the side and said, "For instance, this guy who just walked past, he's one of the important spies of the system, he's a neighbor of mine. These people have quite a lot of power, you wouldn't believe what kind of people they're putting in very important positions, it's awful."

When Miroslav received the first threats, it was April of 2018, one month after David went missing. He felt confusion, as he was one of the very first people to be prosecuted for standing in the square alongside Davor. The threat was vague, stating that he had been too vocal in politics on Facebook and in the media, and that he will be fired from the position as head of unit or even fired from the office on the whole. His initial emotion was guilt. "I thought, my God, did I do something for Srdjan, the director of the agency, to suffer because of me?...I'm thinking could I have unintentionally done something, I don't want him to somehow suffer from me." After racking his brain to remember any instance of political action on Facebook, Miroslav remembered that two months prior, when the then president of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker travelled to Bosnia regarding a questionnaire about European Union accession, he posted an image of the 1930s German war aircraft "the Junkers Ju 87" or "Stuka." Although he intended the post to be tongue in cheek, Srdjan requested a meeting to discuss the issue, about which Srdjan only said that he is a public figure working for a public institution, and it was unacceptable behavior. Agreeing with Srdjan, Miroslav deleted the post immediately—but the paranoia remained.

"Oh God, did I do something? I'm that kind of person, so I went home, looked on my Facebook page because that's the only place I'm putting anything, and went 30 days back. I put in an excel sheet all the things I have published, all the songs, all the stupid things, nothing there for 30 days backwards, I have gone through it. And then I realized that the only thing I have published were two comments, comments that are on the post when David was found. When David's body was found. I published something that institutions should do the most to solve the issue before someone makes any fuss of it or any manipulation with these things....something that there were speculations and I said institutions should do whatever they can in order to not be manipulated. And that's how

diligent, how politically correct I was...I don't want to make a problem for someone who is my boss."

Upon understanding the real issue behind the threat, Miroslav then discussed what to do with his wife and two adult children. Because the secretary of the agency handed him the threat, Miroslav tried to accost him, demanding to know the inner machinations of the threat, and telling him that he is the one who should lose his job, who has lost credibility, and who has committed the crime of mobbing for political reasons.

"I called him—actually I don't have to call him, we are sitting in the same office—and I told him, I have done my homework. You have thought that I'm okay with your threats. I have double checked what alleged crime I have performed, I have identified what is your problem, what bothers you, and my only conclusion is that I don't have any problem. But you guys, you have it. What are you defending, what are you doing with this? You will have to come to this on your terms, I'm absolutely clear with this. And then I ask him what is next—with whom I have been having a coffee? With whom I've been in bed? What's next on your agenda? Not with me, guys. And so, I said do whatever you want. And I became openly supportive for the people for Davor, or Pravda."

Miroslav continued, in his words, "playing a game" by attending work as usual. He was known in the agency as someone people could "turn to," and felt allegiance to his colleagues. "You don't go through official channels because it's a never-ending story. I was one of those that people turned to me when they had a problem, when they needed something, etc." Although the agency previously had weekly or biweekly meetings with senior staff, the meetings abruptly halted. "The director didn't want to see me, or couldn't. He knows. I mean, he's that kind of puppet." While diligently doing his job, Miroslav's rebellion took the form of small provocations. After a tough but ultimately successful meeting in Sarajevo with the WHO, Miroslav came home and posted a photo from the UN in Sarajevo. Minutes later, he attended the daily 6:00 pm protest at Davidov Trg, and posted a photo of himself alongside the Pravda protesters. "I was provoking...I want them to see that I am doing my job, I am."

Soon afterwards, Miroslav's old friend and colleague Alan Seranić, the main health advisor during the Covid crisis, became Minister of Science, and thus in charge of the upcoming *sistemacija*, or reordering of the placements of persons within an agency or ministry. The government decided that Miroslav's agency was to be dissolved and transformed into the newly created ministry of science, technology, and information. On the same document, only one point was listed regarding personnel: a transformation of Miroslav's position, so that he could no

longer act as head of the department. But since the original department would be dismantled within two months, this point was moot:

“If I wanted to go to court here, if there was a court here—I mean there is no one—the single change of the documents, the only point why it’s being done, something like that, because the agency is already supposed to be dismantled, shut down, it’s been only for the sake of showing people that I have been punished. That was October 15th, 2018, and to this day I’m eager to see my dear Alan in time, we will meet sooner or later, he was on my level and we did cooperate, he so many times came to ask me for help....”

Miroslav’s position was secure until the new administration took over in January of 2019. He again stayed and went through the motions, surrounded by colleagues who would retain their jobs and security, and knowing that the *sistemacija* was the safest way for the government to remove him and retain their reputation. “They couldn’t just kick me out, it would be too much, too obvious.”

A couple months later, the December 25th “Bloody Christmas” protest occurred at Davidov Trg. Miroslav’s son still has the club of a police officer that he snatched from a skirmish in which one protester allegedly sustained a concussion. The day’s events were all the catalyst Miroslav needed to make a call on December 26th to his colleagues at UNHCR in Sarajevo to ask if any positions were available. Although he would have to move to Sarajevo, he was grateful that his colleagues found him a position within days. “Those things don’t happen that easily, just in one moment. Those things happen for a purpose.” After speaking with his wife, Miroslav decided to accept the position. “What frightened me so much,” he told me, “was the fact that she immediately said, ‘Take it.’”

When he arrived to Sarajevo, Miroslav’s old friends observed him for some moments before telling him that they believed he was experiencing PTSD. As the sun set around us after hours of conversation, Miroslav reflected on this feeling. “Now I’m talking about it all and you know, still of course you can see that I’m into it. But from this distance, it’s been, it’s past, but at that time it was so tough, so difficult.” In the final month of his job at the ministry, he entered his office everyday with an entrance card tucked into his wallet, upon which he had plastered a *Pravda za Davida* sticker:

“Those bastards, those police are sitting there. That statement [the sticker] was my war. It was well known that I am the one entering with *Pravda za Davida* for months...because you see, I made up my mind, I made up my decisions, it’s no longer about David, not

about Davor for sure but it's about me and what are the core values, what is this life all about. It's about being a human, having a spine. It's not easy in this small village at the end of the day because this is not more than a village. Everybody knows everyone and it's well known who is what, et cetera. It's tough. I'm going through hell. For thirteen months now I'm in Sarajevo, I'm traveling here over the weekend, or not, and it's painful for us, for the family...I can't explain what kind of trauma we have gone through."

By December 31st of 2018, Miroslav had everything in line in Sarajevo—the job, the flat, and the community of his old friends. Continuing to play the game, he asked the ministry for more information about what would happen with his life and the lives of his colleagues, although he knew that by then, everyone knew, from the lowest ranking agent to the secretary, that he had directly accosted. In what he called "his final mark" before leaving the office, Miroslav wrote an official resignation and complaint enumerating the threats and harassments he endured, and forwarded it in an email to every member of the office. He can still remember the expression of his colleagues' faces when they read the email, and the fear that permeated the halls. In Miroslav's words, "It sent a lot of shockwaves through those buildings."

Just ten days before our coffee, Miroslav encountered an old colleague from the Ministry of Economic Affairs near the town center. He said that she ran across the street to embrace him, and said "We need you there and you don't know how much we miss you, everything is falling apart, and so many people heard about this, so many people know about this..." Miroslav emphasized the fear among this woman as well as other colleagues, who at times have looked like they will faint when they see him. "They know what I have done, and it has made some impression...when I see their eyes, I realize that we [the ministry workers] have seen so many things that many people have not."

Although Miroslav splintered long ago from Davor's vision, Miroslav reflected as we walked home under streetlamps:

"I didn't believe in Davor Dragicevic. I do believe in Pravda [za Davida]. I do believe that one day there will be some sort of solution. I want to be part of that solution somehow, I believe I have somewhere somehow perhaps even contributed to something. But not with this kind of political agenda and set up that exists here. That's not happening. A

little bit of drug trafficking, weapons...in the middle of Europe and not in Europe, a godforsaken place. It's excellent for everyone's shady business. That's my conclusion, and for that reason I have lost any kind of hope or faith in the democratic institutions, forces, or anything like that."

Miroslav's story shows the effects of violence "from above," from the practical losses of job and home to the emotional trauma that has shattered his trust in Bosnian institutions, and moreover in his sense of personal safety. Similar discourses of disappointment, failure, and nihilism are sometimes seen among *Pravda za Davida* supporters, despite their usually indefatigable sense of hope. In a Facebook post from December of 2022, Ozren writes a simple phrase: "a new year is coming." He follows this with a biting critique of how, come March, five years will have passed since David's murder. Ozren wrote that the bitterness and powerlessness consumes him to the point of physical illness, and that he is disgusted by his "so-called country." He constantly puts "institutions" in scare quotes, and warns that anyone could have been David; this is the reality that people must wake up to. The emptiness of the concept of the "new year" in Ozren's eyes calls to mind Gramsci's writings, in which he lambasts new year's as a neat and capitalistic management of time that tricks us into thinking that there is a literal break between this year and the last (Gramsci, 1916). While Gramsci is more largely calling for socialism to reject all that does not serve our spirit—such as irrelevant state-sanctioned holidays—his writings connect with the thinking of Ozren, and of many in Banja Luka, that nothing changes anyways. While many of Ozren's posts and speeches do call for an *end* to the striving—even with references to a day of reckoning, justice, and God's will—and to the arrival of a long-awaited punishment of David's murderers, his post about the new year suggests a darkly cyclical nature of how time is moving within the context of the case.

While Bosnia and the pseudo state of *Republika Srpska* are not exactly "failed states" by definition, discourses of "failure" certainly dominate informants' emotional relationship with the state, whether, within, outside of, and even against the *Pravda* movement. Theoretical work on failure and dysfunction have increased especially since the pandemic, and can similarly be linked to late capitalism, climate change, and even in an increase in the production of flimsy short-lived material objects (Ojani et al., 2020). What emerges in the case of *Pravda* and of everyday Banjalukans' frustration with the state is the question of what happens when we do not oppose failure with success but rather see failure as potentially engendering new ways of seeing or being, especially if we pay "attention to how these conditions are made sense of emically" thus ridding ourselves of our preconceptions and making room for something new (Ojana et al., 2020, para. 10).

There is not a dichotomy between failure and success, but instead a way of thinking wherein "failures" are taken in stride or transformed into something else rather than a "success" as it is typically defined. In Banja Luka, creative approaches to "failure" as well as violence may best be found in human relations. This can be seen in the *Pravda* activist's "love" of Bosnia that

compels them to remain and fight even as that love sits uncomfortably next to a virulent critique of the state. And as I will explain in the following section, there is a love in the surprisingly intimate relations between neighbors, hairdressers and clients, bartenders and customers, landlords and tenants—or, *narod*—that can eclipse the divisions stoked by the state.

3.2 *Narod* from below

While low-level corruption often acquires an “immoral” status in the EU and the Global North in general, it may be seen in the Bosnian context as an alternative morality—a signification of care, good will, or the expansion of intimate social circles. The slowness, or sheer inability, to get things done exists coincidentally with freedom and surprise. This paradox, as Sarah Muir and Akhil Gupta have commented, forms “an ideal object of anthropological analysis.” The term “corruption” itself “conjures clandestine transactions outside officially recognized channels; hidden alliances and intimacies; and the rumors, scandals, and gossip that swirl around those illicit and cryptic relations” (Muir and Gupta, 2018, p. S4). The current literature shares my challenge of rejecting stereotypes about “corrupt” political cultures outside of the Global North while also recognizing the vitriol of those same citizens towards large-scale corruption.

I will analyze small-scale corruption, i.e., favors, through its moral role in building relationships rather than its supposedly immoral one in disrupting rules and normative processes. This relates to the distinction between the public and the private. With its origins in European medieval political ideology, the public-private divide is now inseparable from modern states and markets; and its borders blur. As Hannah Arendt has noted, “We know that the contradiction between private and public, typical of the initial stages of the modern age, has been a temporary phenomenon which introduced the utter extinction of the very difference between the private and public realms, the submersion of both in the sphere of the social” (Arendt, 1958, p. 69). In corrupt practices, the border between the private and the public only blurs further, and this lack of clarity comes to constitute a threat or “danger.” But as Douglas details in her purity and danger hypothesis, “disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite” (Douglas, 2003, p.95). While disorder “spoils pattern, it also provides the material of pattern” (Douglas, 2003, p.95).

The “spontaneity” that many describe in the Balkans comes from just this: the subversion of usual codes and expectations provides the “material” for new possibilities or “patterns.” This phenomenon manifests in practical, everyday ways, such as in solutions to basic problems. When a doctor cut off a cast on my arm with regular scissors, for instance, he laughed and said,

“We should have the mechanical cutter, but that doesn’t exist here. So we just use this. I call it Serbian improvisation!” This sense of subversion and improvisation especially comes in resistance to strict planning in social and professional life, which I regularly encountered in the phrase “*polako*” or “slowly” as a response to demands for a more concrete timetable. These various means of bypassing rules and structure amount to their own form of “everyday resistance,” as solutions not sanctioned by the state, or broadly by any institutions as such, emerge as preferable (Scott, 1985).

I found that many of my informants took a certain pride in this approach, not as a primordial characteristic of being “Balkan,” but as one means of dealing with corruption “from above.” My friend Aleksandar, an acrobat and former cirque de soleil performer, took this approach. Usually residing in Vienna, he had returned to Banja Luka during covid to spend time with his father. I met him during a ride share to Vienna in which eight Banjalukans and I, sitting closely together and sharing food, avoided the Slovenian-Austrian border—and thus the covid vaccine check—by winding through a vineyard on a mountainous dirt road. When I noticed signs change from Slovenian to German, Aleksandar assured me, “Don’t worry, Miroslav [the driver] knows what he’s doing, we do this all the time.” Aleksandar lambasted the Austrians for their rule-following tendencies, especially their strict approach to covid. What I remember most from his stories is how he perceived the lack of recognition and respect between one individual and another, as in the case of a man on the Vienna metro remonstrating him for not wearing his mask properly. Although Aleksandar spent his life from childhood practicing ballet and gymnastics, against the expectations of Balkan masculinity, he clung firmly to the idea that the diaspora forgets the sense of freedom back home. He repeated the word “freedom” more times than I can count, and assured me that “anything is possible” in Bosnia.

My friend Zilha always vacillates between a negative and positive view of the structureless-ness of life in Bosnia, sometimes staring off solemnly at a faraway point behind me with sober precision, and other times submerged in such glowing pride that she gives Bosnia a spot “at the top of the world.” As the owner of a cafe situated across from the Health Institute, the only place where one could receive PCR tests for covid, Zilha described to me how she was regularly frustrated by customers that came after their covid tests or appointments for a coffee, yanking their masks down and laughing at how foolish we all were to be afraid of the disease. “If you told them all to cut off their fingers, they’d just do it, Dana.” she’d say, rolling her eyes. But in another mood after a convivial summer evening among friends, she declared:

“There is no other place in the world like this. We have hospitality. That is why I will not leave Bosnia. I can feel the air here. I can feel the water. Life is here. I can feel it. That’s why I will always come back to Bosnia. One day 2 marks, the other day 300 marks [the Bosnian currency]. You wake up in the morning and say, ‘Oh I’ll do this.’ Maybe in the evening you say, ‘Well I didn’t do this, oh well.’ We don’t complicate, we don’t think about the future. We just live for today. It’s not like U.S., Australia, New Zealand...”

Here, Zilha talks about something essentially quotidian: the plans one makes for any given day’s activities, and the amount of money one has or hasn’t to support those plans. This lack of planning is in the Douglasian sense, a “power” as much as it is a “danger”—a point of agency that is not found so commonly in the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, and the rest of the West. Zilha’s perspective is echoed in aesthetic representation in native music, literature, and film of the Balkans as Other, semi-peripheral, and even “the periphery of the periphery” (Majstorović 2021, p.5). It can also be illustrated in Michel de Certeau’s delineations between the “strategies” of the governing system and the resistant “tactics” used in everyday life, usually by migrants, homosexuals, working class people, and other subaltern groups:

“because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing.’ Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities’...This is achieved in the propitious moments when they are able to combine heterogeneous elements (thus, in the supermarket, the housewife confronts heterogeneous and mobile data what she has in the refrigerator, the tastes, appetites, and moods of her guests, the best buys and their possible combinations with what she already has on hand at home, etc; the intellectual synthesis of these given elements takes the form, however, not of a discourse, but of the decision itself, the act and manner in which the opportunity is ‘seized’” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 17).

Essentially, de Certeau describes the transformation of mere events into opportunities, of what is alien into the “propitious.” Some informants associate the cunningness required of such “tactics” as survival mechanisms necessitated by an unruly system that they would rather simply “work.” This is sometimes phrased in terms of productivity, such as a preference for Austria’s reliable public transportation or more ordered systems of healthcare. But here, Zilha has associated the spontaneous spirit with vitality itself: “Life is here.” She has also associated the creation of new, spontaneous realities with an increased ability to *feel* the air and the water with

greater intensity than she would in societies with ordered systems. Here, one thinks of Fanon's writings on the colonized man's dream of a virility that transcends the bounds ordinarily placed on his body—a dream in which “I am jumping, swimming, running, and climbing...I burst out laughing” (Fanon, 1961, p. 15). In the case of both Zilha and Aleksandar's feelings, the desire for such freedom surpasses the rights and privileges stemming from ordered and institutionally functional systems.

This desire for freedom was nowhere more apparent than during the covid lockdown in 2020. In Banja Luka, covid began under the auspices of a “police hour”—a strict curfew at 8:00 pm punishable by fine. Jelena and Duško, some of my closest confidantes with whom I lived in the beginning of my fieldwork (see methodology section of the introduction), were on the other side of the world in America, eating what they deemed over-sugared American bread and sipping flavorless drip coffee. But at least they were floating in a bordered pod on the Carnival cruise ship they had travelled to work on, a perfect panopticon noting its inhabitants coming and going, and thus free of the new virus. I was on a hill above the city center alone at Jelena and Duško's flat, scrolling through images of outdoor triages in New York City, or wondering how a non-smoking yoga instructor died from covid. What was the fate of my paper lungs?

I messaged a few friends to ask if they would take me to the hospital if I got sick—maybe Sandra wouldn't answer the phone—and they laughed. When I turned down a few invitations to house parties, I was chided like a child on school grounds. “Dana is scared of covid!” my friend Djordje wrote on a group text. I ignored the message, and feared myself drifting further and further from informants. There was no blueprint for ethnography in the time of covid.

The attitude of even the most left-leaning Banja Lukans was largely against covid regulations. People found ways around the “police hour” curfew by sleeping over at one another's houses, arguing with shopkeepers about the need to wear a mask, and in dire moments, gaining a spot in the overcrowded hospital system by knowing a doctor or nurse personally, or paying a bribe. My hairdresser, Silvija, hid extra customers upstairs when the inspection would come to her salon in order to evade the stated limitation of one person at a time, and thus avoid a fine when the “inspection” came. In one example, a well-connected family even used ambulances to travel to and from a *slava* or family saint's day in order to prevent being caught by the police during the curfew.

It was clear that the Banjalukan people reflected back the lack of seriousness of the Banjalukan authorities and elites by acting against the covid regulations. Sandra heard from her friend Milica (see chapters one and four) who had worked within the *Ujedinja*

Srpska party that the government was only basing the current regulations on the following: A prom dress company owned by the sibling of a high-ranking official had already ordered gowns, so they could not cancel prom parties. Similarly, a major company with links to the government had already produced many masks, so they would still be required. Conversely, only because the opposite was not true for gloves, the government stopped requiring them.

There was also a general reticence to take the pandemic as a great inconvenience or “trauma.” My dear friend Suzana, who opened a pizzeria in Banja Luka after living in Rome for decades, held similar thoughts throughout the pandemic, scoffing at the “paranoia” and urging me to relax. When Suzana and I drove to her restaurant just before the first lock down, she gestured out the window at lines of people outside the city’s largest grocery store, stocking up on toilet paper and canned food. “Panic,” she said. “This is all just panic over nothing.” Many of my friends, such as Lela, who had moved to Canada for her master’s degree, posted on Facebook sentiments about how the people of Bosnia had already survived a war. Why fear covid?

Bosnia would emerge as the country with the third highest death rate from covid in the world, underlining the systemic failure of the healthcare system. However, this fact was rarely discussed by any of us in Banja Luka, and was not public knowledge until late into the pandemic. After the first lockdown from March 13 until the end of May 2020, which was nominally more strict than in many other parts of Europe, the summer months of 2020 saw Banja Luka’s usual vibrancy return to the streets, shops, cafes, and bars. A later curfew of 11:00 pm remained, but when people told the police that they were simply walking towards home, their story was usually accepted.

Just weeks before I became sick with covid, I engaged in a debate with my friend David from the crossfit gym. The informal sense of conviviality at Crossfit Banjaluka made other crossfit gyms I’d been to around the world—as community-minded and indeed cult-ish as they may be—pale in comparison. The group of us hung from bars and rings and faltered through gymnastics movements like children on a playground, or somehow derived a lot of meaning out of the meaningless feats of strength we achieved with the barbells. I used to see the gym as an escape from “the field” but see in retrospect its centrality to my study of friendship, as it became a meeting place of people who regularly shared information, “favors,” and connections—and also of people who could engage comfortably in heated conflict. David, in his mid twenties, buff, confident, and swaggering, did not share my politics. But he invited me for coffees when his cousin visited from St. Louis and included me in those feats of strength that one might assume

men kept for themselves. While stretching in the corner with the others in that era of less than half-hearted attempts to follow the covid regulations, we somehow found ourselves at odds in a discussion of whether or not I planned to have children, wherein David mostly implored me to do so lest I face a lonely fate.

But when I myself fell sick with covid, I received a phone call from David who had heard through the crossfit gym grapevine of my illness. Displaying a desire to help, he said, “Why didn’t you call me sooner?” After discussing how Bosnia recently topped the European charts for the number of covid cases, he joked, “Well, at least we are good at one thing.” His concern for me showed that Bosnia was in fact good at something else; as Banjalukans utilized the cracks in institutional shortcomings to get things done, so too did they operate under a unique version of care to survive the pandemic.

My falling ill presented lots of ethical dilemmas, especially regarding the older members of the *Pravdaši* who did not understand why I would avoid them from the moment I suspected I had covid, and had even missed Sofija’s birthday party. However, it also presented me with ample examples of care and the gaming of the system “from below.” In addition to David’s offer to help, Suzana pulled up in front of my apartment with a heap of medicines and a box of pizza from her pizzeria. Laughing when I asked if I could come down to take them from her in person, she retorted, “Dana, I am not afraid of corona! Please!” Meanwhile, Jelena and Sandra stayed on hold for hours on the phone to schedule a covid test for me at the hospital—usually a labyrinthine bureaucracy, but made all the worse by the high volume of covid patients.

Meanwhile, friends who I spoke with from all around the world were dumbfounded, either judgmental, jealous, or some combination of the two, of the persistence of social life in Banja Luka during a global pandemic. While each citizen got a stimulus check from the state of a few hundred Bosnian marks, it would not be enough. As Banja Luka’s economy is predominately a service economy, with hospitality jobs at the center, the state announced in early May of 2020 that restaurants, bars, and clubs would open with limited hours, spurring a series of memes about the coronavirus “activating” only at a certain time of night when the clubs closed.

Although the covid regulations had slackened significantly, the summer still lacked the usual sights and sounds of a familiar Banja Luka evening, marked by calls for *fajront*, a final song at closing time, rather than police *inspekcija* profiting from the smallest discrepancy of the covid guidelines under the thinly veiled guise of guarding public health. Left without our usual bars and clubs, Sandra and I spent many evening by the river *Vrba*, where the cool air that would drift across the river’s darkened surface came to relieve us from the day’s humidity. It seemed

that the natural beauty of Banja Luka's landscape emerged in those days as a player above and beyond the social, until thoughts of David's body emerged in the eddies of the water.

One night, the quiet murmur of the river gave way to the sounds of an ever-growing crowd of young people. The conversation between Sandra and I shifted from the growing number of covid cases and frivolous gossip to a sudden blare from a professional-grade speaker someone had placed near the shore: first a resounding blare from a keyboard, then the lyrics:

Ej od kad sam se rodio

Sreće nisam imao

Ej od kad sam se rodio

Sreće nisam imao

Samo ti si sreća bila

Zašto si me ostavila

Samo ti si sreća bila

Zašto si me ostavila

Ej, od kad sam se rodio,

Ništa nisam imao

Ej, od kad sam se rodio,

Nikad ništa nisam imao

Hey, since I was born

I had no luck.

Hey, since I was born

I had no luck.

Only you were luck.

Why did you leave me?

Only you were luck.

Why did you leave me?

Hey, since I was born

I had nothing
 Hey, since I was born
 I never had anything

Despite the tragic nature of the lyrics, and a melody that never quite resolves back to the major tone, the crowd danced to the relentless beat and chanted in unison, “Since I was born, I didn’t have happiness.” The translation of “*sreća*” could signal either “happiness” or “luck” in English; both fit the nature of the song’s meaning. Entitled *Ej od kad sam se rodio* and sung by Sinan Sakić, a Muslim singer well-beloved throughout the former Yugoslavia, the song would later recur at events informal and formal, reverberating even around birthday parties and baptisms, but this first listen in the time of corona struck me hardest. The sense of defiance or “*ina*” (spite) was palpable as the nihilism of the refrain clashed with the exuberance of the crowd. As Sandra mentioned, nothing could stop young people’s desire to “go out,” and experience “*druženje*” or “companionship.” When I asked how Sandra how it was possible that no one from the apartment buildings just behind us had called the police, she said that either someone must have paid off the authorities or was rich enough to shovel out hundreds of marks when the fine came.

In May of 2021, my friends Aleksa, Marko, Djordje, and I were able to get a vaccine with the assistance of our friend Maya, who worked at the health institute. Because I was not a Bosnian citizen, I was not eligible for the vaccines which had been delivered in the tens of thousands via aid from China, Serbia, Slovenia, Malaysia, and Turkey, among others, but ended up unused and expired in storage. The attitude towards the vaccines was characterized by skepticism towards their efficacy (along with skepticism towards the seriousness of covid), or exaggerated warnings about their risks. Women friends of mine in particular were warned by doctors that the vaccine would harm their reproductive systems, and I was urged not to get one. But when I walked into Aleksa’s birthday party, I met Maja, whose first words to me from behind her cigarette smoke were, “So. Do you want a vaccine?” Maja explained that the AstraZeneca vaccine came in large packs that had to be opened all at once—and that most Banjalukans preferred the Chinese or Russian vaccines. When the day came for the vaccination at the health institute, Maja, the daughter of a former diplomat and boasting a high position within the institute, quickly handled my papers and ushered me into the vaccination hall. Our meeting at the birthday party was by chance alone, but it gave me the only key to bypass sanctioned, formal routes to the vaccine. In this way, the efforts of a single person secured my health and ability to travel for months to come.

The ongoing doubts about covid's seriousness and with it, doubts about the vaccine, continued to live paradoxically alongside serious cases, and even deaths, of loved ones. My friends from crossfit, Una and Dijana, sat with me at Suzana's pizzeria on a summer night in 2021 while their 34-year-old friend Filip, a well-known local DJ, was hospitalized due to covid. I listened quietly as Una and Dijana debated the costs and benefits of the vaccine. While they were not wholly anti-vaccine, they had anxieties about which vaccine was less harmful, particularly in relation to women's health. Una and her partner were trying to conceive, and the threat of covid could not easily be weighed against the apparent threat of a complicated pregnancy. But the conversation quickly vacillated between an impassionate and almost trivial attitude towards which vaccine to take, and serious concern for Filip, who now needed a blood transfusion in order to survive. Filip was not vaccinated, and like many of us in Banja Luka in 2021, moved freely through crowded public space without fear or thought of covid. But just days after our conversation, he passed away. Messages of mourning and adoration poured forth on social media, and I felt the pain of many friends who knew him and his work as a DJ. Still, I noticed that for many, the connection was not drawn between the vaccine, or preventative measures, and Filip's passing. Covid remained in the minds of many Banjalukans an at times annoying and at times tragic fate, but not a fate that they could control.

What they could control, however, were their efforts to help one another. The covid era thus illuminated even more brightly the role of *narod* in opposition to the role of state institutions. Even in dire situations, such as Sandra's elderly father requiring medical assistance for a covid infection, our extreme interdependence became apparent. When he first received the diagnosis, we recognized the emergency at hand; his slew of pre-existing conditions and the state of Bosnian public hospitals cast his prognosis into doubt. Around the table in Sandra's kitchen, her sister, her boyfriend, and I racked our brains for our contacts who could ensure him a bed at the over-capacitated hospital—and attention from the nurses, who would prioritize those with whom they had *veze* (meaning connections, as I will elaborate on further in the chapter), or could pay a bribe. Along with others' suggestions, I offered my contacts from the gym who studied medicine or worked in other departments in the hospital. As the night passed with several unsuccessful texts and calls, we sank into our chairs and felt compelled to give up.

But knowing that *veze* was our only means, we continued the next day. Sandra eventually found a friend from her elementary school who worked in the covid unit and promised to take care of Sandra's father. This would save her father from a fate of sleeping in the ward for the infected, which Sandra had heard had broken windows that let in cold air at night. Although she had not spoken to her elementary school friend in years, she was comforted by his eagerness to help and

his pledge to get her father the necessary medicines. As was true in less dire cases of requiring *veze*, the covid pandemic brought the importance of connection to the fore and made clearer the opposing poles that emerge—the agency inherent in saving a life by leveraging contacts and friendships, and at the same time, the frustration of needing to bear that labor in lieu of systems “just working.”

3.3 The resistant potential of *narod* and social personhood

As Muir and Gupta note, “It is nearly impossible to argue convincingly in favor of corruption” (Muir & Gupta, 2018, p.S5). While it is true that “North Atlantic universals” such as “development, democracy, and civil society” mistakenly assume transhistorical relevance, and are all too often used as normative, ahistoric categories, processes of corruption such as clientelism and forced party loyalty are directly responsible for maintaining the rule of an oligarchic few—and for the state’s murder of David, and its subsequent concealment (Trouillot, 2003, as cited in Muir & Gupta, 2018).

Zilha’s countenance changed when I asked her, for instance, about Pravda activists and the state. After David’s murderer, she said, “Everything changed, people changed. They will destroy it. They will destroy everything. I don’t know what to tell you.” Like many, she is not sure why the Pravda activists continue against all odds of achieving justice. “They are fighting for something they’ll never get. And that’s Bosnia.”

As Muir and Gupta note, affect plays a key role in statecraft, especially in securing sovereignty and “conviviality” among the state’s subjects. But, importantly, commitment to the state can also “thrive, however paradoxically, in conditions of critique, suspicion, and even resistance” (Muir & Gupta, 2018, p.S10). In other words, the idea of the state remains essential even in instances of resistance against it; as we have seen in the *Pravda* movement, immense passion and desire can be felt from their calls for better care from the state, which they see as the arbiter of justice, even through its failures. The corruption/anti-corruption debate may even in itself assist in the process of constructing the state. All of these considerations and paradoxes are affectively driven, as the concept of corruption itself is characterized by “remarkably rich connections of mimetic exchange and solidarity among the principal actors as well as among those positioned as their audience” (Muir & Gupta, 2018, p.S10). Muir and Gupta also make the important observation that corruption provides “a somewhat paradoxical avenue to the sacred in Durkheim’s (1995 [1912]) sense of that which, in being set apart from the everyday, opens up onto a transcendent view of sociality” (Muir & Gupta, 2018, p.S10; Durkheim 1995).

Sovereignty itself is established through “a thoroughly intimate, affective and ambivalent affair” rather than an institutional one (Muir & Gupta, 2018, p.S10).

As Akhil Gupta also witnessed in his ethnography of bureaucracy, structural violence, and poverty in northern India, discussions of corruption form the fabric of nightly conversation among families and friends in Banja Luka—whether the tale involves outwitting a bureaucrat, or being outwitted, or planning strategies for breaking through a roadblock in the system. There is always a chance that an acquaintance can find a spot in a crowded nursing home, or know the right person in *zgrada vlade*, the government building, to sign off on a new business venture or property purchase. The involvement of the state and its bureaucratic representatives in everyday matters grows deeper, as formal and impersonal means of getting things done fail. This fosters a specific intimacy with and knowledge of the state—a living alongside it. I agree with Gupta’s assertion that everyday peoples’ knowledge of the state and/or politics in smaller towns (like Banja Luka) should not be only “the charmingly counterintuitive story of cosmopolitan villagers who are better informed than the social scientist about modern institutions,” nor as a passive strategy of survival (Gupta, 2012, p. 76). Rather, they are knowledgeable agents in the social world whose instrumentalization of social contacts and creative seeking of alternate paths to achieving goals brings them further into the fold of projects and aspirations that are otherwise shrouded by institutional procedures.

Of course, along with the necessitation of deeply knowing state procedures and means of getting things done comes the necessitation of deeply trusting. Increased intimacy and a sense of “being close up” to the state coincides with increased intimacy with one another, as everyone becomes an active or at least potential agent of care for what can be extremely urgent matters.

While this intimacy comes with a hefty price to pay in the amount of moral judgment, sense of character, as well as lost opportunities if the favor is not reciprocated, there is ultimately rarely legal recompense for failing to carry out a deal. And what comes out of a successful deal or case of “small-scale corruption” is a good story to tell. As Gupta suggests, *narrative* is essential to the state and to governmentality, and “no project of political transformation, resistance, or reform is possible without changing narratives of rule, morality and subjectivity” (Gupta, 2012, p. 111). The colorful and imaginative narration surrounding corruption has so taken hold of popular consciousness in the Balkans that it cannot be separated out of any basic institution: family, religion, and of course the state, among others (Gupta, 2012, p.112). Beyond the argument I have made about corruption leading to social cohesion, I will apply Gupta’s discursive argument to the case of Banja Luka. Like Gupta’s informants, who sometimes use idioms from Hindu

religious epics in their corruption narratives, my informants frequently appealed to Serbian Orthodoxy, exclaiming “*ako bog da*,” or “if God allows,” even when they are Orthodox by name rather than practice. The focus in Serb Orthodoxy on a more “present” experience of the Divine (through practices such as fasting) rather than on some far-sighted eschatological vision may also lend itself to the broader culture of incremental gambles won and lost (Lackenby 2020,2021).

While this claim could be argued to appeal more to “vjernici” or “believers” rather than the areligious, corruption narratives are often ornamented by the qualities of an epic, if not a biblical, tale, littered with nods to “heroism, debasement, the fall of humans from the path of virtue, resoluteness, the overcoming of impossible odds and the making of superhuman sacrifices, and the providential actions of an unknowable deity, which could be anyway from the chief minister to the district magistrate” (Gupta, 2012, p. 113). These corruption stories are clearly *moving*, also in the sense that they move and circulate; or in our case, more through oral storytelling, newspapers, and most importantly through social media and regular calls and messages, including to those in the diaspora who played a significant role in the early protests of *Pravda za Davida*.

Whether or not these tales are decorated with epic and/or spiritual imagery, they touch on a wide array of emotions: “disgust, anger, and frustration at corrupt officials or organizations; happiness at having cleverly beaten the system or satisfaction at getting a job accomplished; and humor, sarcasm, and irony can be effective techniques for coping with the absurdities of bureaucratic process” (Gupta, 2012, p. 113). We can see this in my informants’ disgust at the regime and its dysfunctional bureaucracy (see also chapter one), but also in the humor that they find in the process. As I mentioned in my introduction regarding the acquisition of my visa, what was to me a harrowing and existential procedure was often met with laughter and urges for *polako*, or “taking it easy.” We can also see “happiness at having cleverly beaten the system”; for instance, when my friend’s father was in a dire situation in the hospital, we at least were able to laugh and rejoice that her friend’s brother had had sexual relationships with “half of the nurses,” and could reach out to them to ensure that he received attention and care; without that *veza*, we would have struggled to keep him alive. In less dire cases or “corruption tales,” the sense of humor and sarcasm still proves a potent coping mechanism; whether in the quest to find connections to a *majstor* (repairman) to fix one’s sink (they have all moved abroad and have become a highly valuable service), to stay at the bar past closing time during the restricted hours of the covid measures, or to find someone in the government who will sign off on a business plan, the “corruption stories” are rife with emotional richness. We can see how these stories and

their concomitant emotions *move* and circulate, connecting bodies to other bodies precisely because they “stick” and thus transform the storytellers and their audience (Ahmed, 2014, p. 10).

How do these tales of corruption relate to the resistant potential of *narod*? Hromadžić has noted that *narod* “is generative of political agency and social sensibility” and is thus used as a “counter-discourse” in Bosnia, where the idea of a “nation” can have—especially for an outsider looking in—connotations of fragmentation and war rather than community. But stories of the wins and losses of *veze* and *štele* are part of the fabric of the transethnic *narod* of Bosnia, illustrating common means of navigating corrupt institutions regardless of ethnic belonging. Unlike “politika,” which is associated with “untrustworthy, compromised, greed-driven, career-oriented people,” the counter-discourse of *narod* allows “decent” people from various ethnic groups to together discuss and even problematize “nationalism” itself, and to critique violence from above (Hromadžić, 2015, p. 131, Kolind, 2008).

In addition to Azra Hromadžić’s comments on *narod*, I reference Čarna Brković’s extensive study of clientelism and the use of *veze* or relationships, associations, and connections beyond the strata of politics and the state proper and into everyday life. I align myself with Brković’s observation that, while many Bosnians find the necessity of finding “favors” in order to achieve goals frustrating, and as a phenomena that does not plague citizens in “normal” countries, they also employ terms of morality, friendship, and even reverence to those with a strong *štela*—the “people, relations and practices implicated in obtaining public or private resources through a personalised connection,” and which implies that “the official procedure was circumvented, or that there was no official procedure for obtaining the resource in the first place” (Brković, 2019). Processes of *veze* and *štela*, as Brković concludes, help Bosnians make sense of social relations, and are not only to be expected, but also met with a positive attitude.

Brković offers three frames—culturalist, systemic, and moral—through which social scientists have tried to make sense of favors. The culturalist perspective often leans on essentializing and deterministic qualities of Bosnia and its people, which as I have argued previously, is often perpetuated by Bosnians themselves in a self-ironic or self-stigmatizing spirit. Self-deprecating or irreverent humor about favors and corruption often serves to promote cultural intimacy and identity; as Herzfeld has argued, these aspects of culture “are considered a source of external embarrassment but...nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality” and “self-stereotypes that insiders express ostensibly at their own collective expense” (Brković 2017; Herzfeld, 2016[1997]). Although possibly empowering, I agree with Brković’s assertion

that any construct of an ossified Balkan “character” that inherently tends towards corruption is problematic to say the least, and does not lend itself to a deeper explanation.

The systemic framework developed as a critical response to the culturalist framework, and interestingly borrowed much of its ethos from development literature. Especially in Bosnia’s early statehood, Bosnia was often constrained by its postsocialist, postwar nomenclature, and thus set in a relative lack against the seemingly functional markets or democracy of the West. The danger inherent in this approach is its naming of “proper” markets and democracies as static categories towards which processual, developing states can only strive. While, as Gupta has also argued, functional arguments such as the systemic which suggest that people use corruption or favors as a means by which they navigate a “failing” state may rationalize their behavior, Brković rightly concludes that they “do not take into account that favors may shape personhoods” (Brković, 2017, p.58). Finally, critics of the systemic perspective developed the moral framework, which hypothesizes that the process of seeking of favors offers one the ability to craft oneself into a moral person, or to become the particular self one has imagined. While this perspective importantly allows for more agency, it does not account for the dark sides of corruption—the exhaustion and madness incurred by the fight (and the gamble) to secure even basic everyday needs, not to mention the broadscale effects of elite corruption.

Brković’s solution to the shortcoming of these three frameworks is to suggest that *veze* and *šteke* rather shape “social personhood,” and in turn influence the reproduction of power. They are relational rather than metonymic tools which translate “the language of citizenship rights into the language of care and personal relations and vice versa” (Brković, 2017, p.59). Importantly, she notes that this is not solely Bosnian, Balkan, or Eastern European phenomenon. I align my argument with Brković, and have hoped to illustrate the specificity of the Banja Luka case, which is marked by favors that ease life under the neglect of the state of *Republika Srpska*. The relational and collective means of coping via connections and favors illustrate a particular affect, as I have explored previously via Gupta and Ahmed’s theories, that touches on extra-linguistic emotions that foster a feeling of home.

It is precisely this intimate feeling of home, an intense *belonging*, that marks many of my informants’ relationship with Banja Luka.

This feeling of belonging, which I will delve into in the following chapter, was held across informants of varying political ideologies, from the *Pravdaši* to even the police themselves. As we have seen in my earlier anecdote about the raid of the *Smuggler’s* bar, police undoubtedly see themselves to greater or lesser extents as the on-the-ground defenders of R.S. rule. And as we

have seen in the case of David's murder, some are capable of brutal violence. More often than not, the *Pravdaši* cursed the police state as we walked past their central office, and generally referred to the policemen as idiots. Nonetheless, the at times light banter between the *Pravdaši* and the policemen—even with those that have previously arrested them—speaks to the idea of “social personhood” and “decent people,” or, *pošteni ljudi* (Kolind, 2007, p. 127 & Kolind, 2008, p. 135). In one such nod at peace and “decency,” Sofija famously handed out roses to the policemen lining the square, hinting that they, too, were entrenched in the society that *Pravda* was fighting for. Several accounts held that the policemen struggled to meet Davor's mother Suzana's eyes when she held a photograph of David on the square, while others mentioned tears in their eyes during the protests. As my friend Marija, a young academic explained, “Even the police here are not really *bad*. We have a mutual understanding of good. It only comes from the fear.”

As I gathered myself for one interview with a police inspector who my friend Suzana called “Peula,” I certainly had in mind my experiences at *Smugger's*, of the various government offices through which my friends and I had suffered through the bureaucracy, and of the moments of tension between the police and the *Pravdaši*. I strolled into the pizzeria and recalled all the times I had frequented it after the gym with Suzana, after her urging me, *kraljice bajmo*, come on queen. We would draw smoke into our freshly opened lungs and experience something like a *slava*—a family saint's day—on any random weeknight, reviewing the tales and gossips of the pizzeria, our gym, and some politics that, even in this usual meeting place of the ruling party and its officials who frequented the pizzeria, included scoffing at Dodik's face when it flashed across the television.

I first met Peula after a bout of extreme sickness, wherein I lived half at Suzana's, half at the pizzeria, where I'd wait faint on the booth seat waiting for some rice and juice, free of charge. The first morning I could eat pizza again, I finally met the man I'd heard so much about—the chief police inspector for the district of Budžak. His eyes squarely met mine as he asked what I was doing in Banja Luka, where I was working, what did my then boyfriend do, where did he work, did he live with me, was I a spy. He softened some when I admitted to liking rakija and loving Banja Luka, and his face crinkled into a smile. I am not sure that he ever met me again without inquiring if I was a spy, joking that each time I typed something on my phone, “She's writing about me!” I could do nothing but try to meet his humor: “Well Peula, maybe it would be better to be a spy than a student, I'd make more money.” And Suzana would chime in, “Please, if Dana was a spy, she would be a spy for the Serbs, not the Americans.” But once, she told me how often Peula pondered whether or not I am really a spy. She told me she would

sometimes ask him while they chatted, “Who cares really, even she was?” And he’d nod and say that he guesses that’s true. *Jebiga* (fuck it)⁵.

Meeting Peula for the interview was like meeting the duality of the ever-present and never-present state in embodied form. We were in the pizzeria in the daylight, which cast a different light on our cigarette smoke than we were used to, and startled us both into a more professional code of conduct. Despite my insecurity, I realized that I inspired in him some kind of pride in my recognizing him. After relaxing a bit into every response, he’d abruptly re-draw his boundary and say only, “*sledeće pitanje*.” Next question.

When I asked what he likes about Banja Luka, he began simply with, “Well, it is the most beautiful city I the world.” As he continued, I was surprised how much I agreed with him:

“It has *veliki ljudi* (meaning “big people” but in the meaning of strength, character) ready for every situation, an adaptable mentality. Our experiences have led us to a certain kind of behavior. This entire region has a similar thing going on...for instance in Hercegovina where they have gone hungry many times, they have learned to adapt.”

When asked about why people left, he smiled and said, “They might leave, but I know they will come back...liberal capitalism does not tell the truth. The EU will just crash, it is already failing. Why is it better here? Because they are not used to crisis. They have crises...covid, natural resources, for five, six, years. But I cannot even say how long we’ve been in crisis.”

As I will explore in the following chapter, the sense of belonging that Peula describes is echoed by many of my friends—even the *Pravdaši* who his police corps nominally opposed. While often jokingly referred to as a curse rather than a blessing, this belonging underlies the question that especially pulls at the hearts of my peers—whether to stay or to leave Bosnia.

⁵ As one of my informants said, *jebiga* is “the most important word in our language.” Used to signify misfortune or a lack of caring, it is said in comical situations as much as serious ones, always implying a kind of nihilist acceptance.

Chapter Four: Where is Home?: Uncertain Futures and the Question of Belonging

In this chapter, I will address the question that naturally emerges from the preceding two chapters: whether to stay within Bosnia or to leave. We have seen so far how the murder of David Dragičević and subsequent protests have given way to new modes of political engagement through hope and mourning alike. Similarly, we have seen how informal practices of getting things done in Bosnia can have resistant potential. However, life “on the bridge” has material costs that call imagined futures, particularly those of young people, into question.

Even David’s body, exhumed from its burial site in Banja Luka in 2019 and moved to Vienna, symbolizes the ultimate rejection of Bosnia as a current—or potential—source of justice, and with that, its rejection as a “home.” The choice of Davor and Suzana to relocate David’s body signifies that it does not “belong” to the state that failed him. As Suzana posted on Facebook, “Dear good people who stand with us in our pain, who understand us, who understand why it is important for us that David finds his peace far away from the state and the city where he was killed, and who want to attend the final farewell of our David, I want to inform you that the funeral will take place on Friday, March 15th, at the city cemetery, Wiener Straße 108 2700 Wiener Neustadt.” The movement of David’s body creates a powerful symbol for the movement of the living from within Bosnia to the diaspora, and with that migration, the movement of their hopes, disappointments, and nostalgic attachments. From David’s new grave and its images across the news, David was “made to speak from the dead”; as Ozren told reporters in Wiener Neustadt about the reburial, “That day carries a powerful message, which is that here, not even the dead find peace,” (von Bieberstein, 2017, p. 56; N1 Sarajevo, 2019).

On the other hand, Ozren and the *Pravdaši*’s fight for justice took on new goals following the reburial, as their own attachments bonded them to rather than drove them from Bosnia. Below, I will trace the ambivalence surrounding questions of relocation among the *Pravdaši* and my other interlocutors, ultimately returning to the concept of love as a driving force.

4.1 Violence, again

As of April 2024, the threat of unrest took over Banja Luka as a U.N. resolution declaring the Srebrenica killings a genocide invoked retaliatory comments from Dodik. Upholding the longheld mythology that the murder of more than 8,000 Bosniak men and women in July 1995

was retaliatory act of war rather than a genocide, Dodik said in a public statement, “While it was a mistake that left behind an enormous crime, it was a crime at the end of the war after fatigue, hatred, suffering, and revenge, but it was not genocide” (Kurtic, 2024).

A wave of messages from friends even voiced fears that Dodik would declare secession—the separation of *Republika Sprska* from Bosnia and Herzegovina—which would inevitably result, if not in armed conflict, in sanctions imposed by the west that sink Banjalukans further into poverty. It was impossible to know what was merely inflammatory rhetoric, and on the other end of the spectrum, what might instigate violent conflict. My close friend Jelena, with whom I had lived before the covid pandemic, and I spoke about her skepticism towards Dodik’s threats—which we had seen in various forms over the last decade with none of the threats coming true—but also the inevitable feeling of insecurity that spread affectively from a discourse of war echoing through Banja Luka. Jelena recalled that her parents and their friends similarly cast aside the threat of conflict as something impossible, even laughable, in the years leading up to the war. And she felt a shred of relief that she and Duško lived in Vienna—”at least my parents can come to stay with us if something happens.”

While the resolution for officially recognizing the Srebrenica genocide has since passed with a majority in the UN, Dodik’s threats of secession have faded from public discourse. Nonetheless, his rhetoric deteriorated further the sense that Banja Luka was a place in which my informants’ imagined futures could find secure footing.

As I’ve outlined in chapters 2 and 3, several reasons beyond the most recent iteration of instability underlie the pull to leave Banja Luka. With the emigration rate of the tertiary educated from Bosnia and Herzegovina at 28.6%, the country joins the other of the “Western Balkan Six” countries—Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia—as one of the world’s brain drain “leaders” (Kačapor-Džihic & Oruč, 2012). Starting with the “guest workers” program in the 1960s, which attempted to flatten unemployment by offering citizens in the former Yugoslavia opportunities to work abroad, the trend only continued in the following decades, ultimately spiking during the 1990s war. As of 2010, an estimated three million Bosnians lived outside Bosnia while 3.4 million lived within Bosnia’s borders, and of those who left seeking better labor opportunities, this includes low-skilled workers whose minimum wage cannot cover living expenses, and high-skilled workers seeking greater financial and professional satisfaction (Bosnia and Herzegovina Migration Profile, 2010).

Against this greater backdrop of migration trends, we also see the shock of David’s murder and the mobilization of the resistance that followed, as well as the persistence of corruption. In the

former, we see a concrete necropolitical case of murder, and in the latter, a slow and steady “murder” of dreams, futures, and imagined selves in favor of the elites. Still, as I have explained in the previous chapter, what I have named “violence from above” exists alongside a resistant “*narod*” that muddles my informants’ vision of an ideal future.

These conditions, at least in an affective sense, led my informants to feel that not only were circumstances unchanging, but that they had grown worse. While this sense of regression certainly was aggravated by a long passage of time in the “post” condition marked by waiting on both the smaller scales—slow pace of life, slow travel routes (as my friend Bojan lamented, “Why does it take me two hours just to get to my hometown, just because it’s in the Federation [rather than the R.S.]?”)—and on the larger scales of bureaucratic blocks to health and business ventures, material signs of the regression are increasingly present.

As friends regularly told me, things had changed. Djordje, a taxi driver who was involved with Pravda at its height, had, in place of what might be the expected “Yugo-nostalgia,” a nostalgia for the decade prior. “There were more festivals, more people going out. Now everything is dull, everyone is leaving.” I agreed with Djordje, remembering the famed summer festival *Demofest*, which was abruptly shut down after its organizer publicly supported Pravda. A literal shut down of public culture had combined with the insidious rise of youth unemployment to produce this ennui—a state going nowhere, and perhaps even losing the present joys of leisure and dance culture I’d believed in during my previous fieldwork. This ennui and lack of embodied spaces has only been exacerbated in the time of corona. As my friend Žuti in Sarajevo told me, “Everything has changed. It’s not like when you lived here before. No one goes out anymore, no one worth talking to is in the city, I cannot go anymore and listen to the same gossip and people bragging about their cars and their salaries. I just pat them on the shoulder and say *najjači si* (you’re the strongest/best). I play along and I can laugh at them later.”

In the summer of 2021, I watched with Zilha and Sandra as City Pub, a staple of the alternative scene and thus a statement against elite-backed turbofolk clubs, was demolished to rubble. In its place will be “*Bijeli Dvor*,” a “modern” apartment style building that most of my friends see as an ugly imposition placed next to decades-older buildings constructed after the earthquake of 1969. “Sophistication and elegance in the heart of Banja Luka! Different from all real estate on the market!” the website boasts. Zilha watched the empty space where we had danced ten years prior fill with clouds of dust and the clamor of a dump truck, and turned to us to say, “Everything changed. People changed. They will destroy it. They will destroy everything. I don’t know what to tell you.”

My conversation with Miroslav, the former member of the Ministry of Intelligence (see chapter three), similarly ended with a stroll past the buildings of the main square, many of which include Dodik-backed bars. As we passed Gatsby, a high-scale spot frequented by members of the party, he lamented, “I am watching the city and places I loved before become something I hate.” In addition to the pre-existing reasons behind Bosnians’ choice to migrate, David’s murder and the persistent lack of a fair trial laid bare the state’s shortcomings—and cast into further doubt *Republika Srpska*’s politicians’ narrative of care and protection of its citizens.

4.2 Home or “belonging”?

Faced with the realities of increasing corruption and violence, two paths emerge: to leave and start a new life, or to stay and fight for a better reality within Bosnia. Danijela Majstorović explains the predicament with reference to Hamlet’s existential dilemma:

The motto “Occupy or Leave” reverberates with the famous “To be, or not to be” soliloquy from Hamlet, because the question could be extended to “Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer, The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles, And by opposing end them.” Fortune has indeed been outrageous in the periphery. Hamlet’s dilemma embodies two contemporary trends that stand out in a summary of popular dissatisfaction with the current situation in BiH: lines of people in front of foreign embassies waiting for their visas to leave the country in search of employment, and people occupying public spaces to protest. (Majstorović, 2021, p. 184)

Simply put, one may either give up on the state entirely by way of leaving, or counteract the state in the form of protest. As in the Hamlet metaphor, this contradiction is imbued with intense affect: the question of whether to leave or to stay—especially when staying involves a belief that one could change things for the better—is existential to say the least. I often found in my time in Banja Luka that hopelessness creates a “mirror” to hope, and is therefore not devoid of affect. Despite stereotypes of the region by the uninitiated as an apathetic or even affect-less political landscape, the choice explained in Hamlet’s soliloquy pulls at the heart of all Banjalukans as an ever-present, nagging decision. Whether practicing seasonal labor on the Croatian coast, permanently relocating, or having family members in the diaspora, one’s personal experience or the experience of those closest to them is marked by question: Where is home?

Stef Jansen explains that this preoccupation with “home” should not be conflated simply with notions of nationalism, nor should the desire for “normal lives” be associated with the (classically) teleological approach to the “transition” from socialism to capitalism.

Anthropologists, regularly engaging with the cultural relativist tradition, seek to subvert “the oppressive workings of...modernist temporal reasoning” and instead seek “resilient subaltern alternatives” by way of cyclical temporality (Jansen, 2014, p. S74). But, many in Jansen's Bosnian field site of Dobrinja resisted such reasoning; associations of cyclical reasoning with nationalism and war (and therefore the current predicament of post-Dayton life) make it an unlikely starting point. And so, rather than seeking a subaltern culture of temporality, I emulate Jansen's method of following his informants' own reasoning out of a very unreasonable situation.

Some studies have engaged with the question of “belonging” through the lens of materiality, highlight a specific connection to land or territorial claims as the starting point (Fontein 2011). While Banja Luka offers a colorful “territory” of social life through its teeming cafes, streets, and post-socialist apartment complexes, I am interested also in the immaterial and affective impact of the space. Thus, I will discuss a feeling of belonging, underlined by hope, yearning, and dreams, rather than a spatialized “home” as such. While the majority of my interlocutors comprise those who have stayed in Banja Luka, it is precisely these complex feelings regarding belonging, as well as the pervasive possibility of leaving, that binds my friends' imaginaries to the fieldsite of Banja Luka. Stef Jansen's term “homemaking” is particularly helpful here; while not denying the importance of materiality to “home,” Jansen explains,

“...almost all my work is actually about homemaking, not about home. If we start from the notion that home is an ideal, then this means that it is something we cannot really study empirically because is not actually there. We could only study people's representations of it. But what we can study are the things that people do, the practices that they engage in order to try to approximate that ideal” (interview with Stef Jansen, 2017).

As I have explained in the theoretical section of my introduction regarding the work of Sara Ahmed, emotions are not something we “have,” but rather something we “do.” It is through emotions, meaning how we respond to objects and others, that boundaries are made: the “I” or the “we” take the shape of our contact with others (Ahmed 2014). As she explains through her concept of “affective economies,” this renders emotions social, with the capacity to align “individuals with communities” or “bodily space with social space” through their “very intensity” (Ahmed 2004, p.119). Intensifying attachments across various scales make belonging

felt, not necessarily to the “nation” but to “the community, the diaspora, the neighborhood, the couple or the family” (Antonsich 2010, p. 644). Thus, as an affective state, belonging could be said to be situated between the personal and the political. Importantly, Ahmed’s line of thought on emotions *moving* through bodily and social space has specific bearing on the question of belonging and migration. When people “move away from home or indeed, between ‘homes’, emotions themselves are on the move” (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015, p.73).

In the case of the former Yugoslavia generally speaking, the theoretical preference for “belonging” emerges even in emic terms. In order to bypass the common complication of politicizing one’s language by defining it as Bosnian, Croatian, or Serbian (although they are one and the same apart from a few differences in vocabulary often exaggerated by nationalists from each side), the language is rather referred to rather as “naš,” i.e. “Ona govori naš” or “She speaks ours.” Deeming a language “ours” not only obscures ethnonational belonging, but also defines belonging beyond labels and instead by the shared experiences of violence and corruption I have detailed in previous chapters. As I have explored there, it is the fact that these experiences “belong” to each constituent group equally that negates their nationalist meaning. And so, as Jansen argued against the conflation of home and nationalism, I also argue that “belonging” exists beyond the label of any one ethnic group, and instead refers to an undergoing of emotions, practices, and shared peripheral experience (Majstorović, 2021).

4.3 On leaving, and waiting to leave

“Our shadows shall tread Vienna's streets, roaming the courtyard, striking fear in noble hearts.” -Gavrilo Princip

I first heard this quote by Gavrilo Princip, the assassin of the heir to the throne of Austro-Hungary, from some of my friends in Banja Luka—namely, those who find Vienna’s hyper organization and imperial architecture distasteful. The quote usually came up in a self-ironic manner when discussing one of our peers’ decision to move to Vienna and join the more than one hundred thousand people from the former Yugoslavia residing there. While seeped in intentional irony and hyperbole, my informants used Princip’s words as a proverbial middle finger to the pressure to assimilate to Austrian culture—and also a point of pride in maintaining an identity that could “strike fear” in those who cannot understand or control them.⁶

⁶ From the lens of socialist Yugoslavia, Gavrilo Princip can be seen as a hero of all ethnic groups and as someone who liberated Yugoslavs from empire. In the context of the 1990s war, he began to be seen by some as a symbol of Serb nationalism and the concept of a “Greater Serbia.” While today, some Bosniaks and Croats reject him entirely,

While emotions surrounding the decision to leave Bosnia for Austria and elsewhere affect all generations, nowhere is the Shakespearian dilemma explained by Majstorović more pressing than among the youth. Mirrored in the title of Pravda za Davida's Vienna-based NGO, "Justice for David and All the Children of Bosnia and Herzegovina," the demand for justice for "the children" includes young adults. Related to the direct and violent case of David's untimely death, this section will highlight the youth as those upon which the burden of "Hamlet's dilemma" falls most heavily. As my friend Milan A. said regarding the question of staying or going, "If you're going to write about anything, it's that. There are no future prospects and I feel like should work towards something or fight for something. But I am not able to."

Milan A., 23, teaches English online for a Chinese company operating out of Serbia. This company presents its Bosnian and Serbian teachers as U.S. Americans so that Chinese parents are willing to pay more classes taught by a "native speaker." Milan has a close relationship with some of his students, but has to use a fake name. Several of my informants work for this company, and some cite the assumption of the fake identity as particularly depressing or disingenuous when interacting with the students. Others, working domestically for U.S.-based call centers, cite a similar feeling of false consciousness when their names are mispronounced, although they are allowed to disclose their true location and identity. Milan often staves off these existential considerations by referring to his work in a self-ironic and cheerful tone. The same applies for his general view of Banja Luka, which he describes in an only half-joking manner as "lawlessness in its best form." This self-irony is a common way of dealing with the everyday realities (see chapter 3) of living in—and staying in—Banja Luka, which may be summarized as "stuckedness," or, an existential immobility accompanying states of "permanent crisis" (Hage, 2009, para. 1). I remember how Milan cut our conversation short and concluded, "Anyway, I want to make something positive while you are here. We all [in Bosnia] have that welcoming attitude towards strangers."

Milan plans to leave one day, at least for the short term, to work on a ship in the states. As I explained previously, the existential dilemma of leaving, even for those who remain in Banja Luka, always dangles on the horizon. The concomitant emotions of stuckedness—and especially of waiting—weighed heavily on Milan's older brother Aleksa, 25, who worked for the same Chinese company while also studying philosophy at the University of Banja Luka. With only one professor supporting Aleksa's interest in Marxism, and the rest espousing more Serb

he is often regarded by even anti-nationalist Serbs as a symbol of the Yugoslav imaginary against Austro-Hungarian imperialism (Fabijančić, 2010).

Orthodox tenants than philosophy, Aleksa turned his intellectual pursuits to reading books and watching films produced mostly outside of the former Yugoslavia. He thought of Banja Luka as “slow,” “depressing,” and with a distinct lack of interesting activities. He worked for one summer at a bar in Rhode Island with the “work and travel” program, and enjoyed his international co-workers, but largely found U.S. individualism frustrating. He tells me the ultimate goal would be something “in between” the U.S. mentality and the post-socialist one.

He has since applied for residence in the Netherlands where his Croatian girlfriend has relocated, and our phone conversations now center on obscure application requirements and the technicalities of securing a flat, an address card, and a work permit. Constantly shifting between his hometown of Dubica and Banja Luka, as well as Croatia and the Netherlands to visit his girlfriend, we see what Shahram Khosravi has described as a temporal and spatial stretching of waiting, from the slew of pre-travel anxieties, to the travel itself, to the process of establishing oneself upon arrival⁷ (Khosravi, 2020).” Importantly, as I have explained of the social dimension of affect as emotions that travel, Khosravi notes that “waiting is never an individual action,” but rather has consequences for many people around the mobile subject, who remain “in a state of waiting for material and non-material remittances, or for reunification” (Khosravi, 2020 p. 203). In emic terms, my friend Tica, himself a metal singer, has often said, “*Život je metal*” or “Life is metal” to refer to this state of chaos and uncertainty. Indeed, experiences with labyrinthine bureaucracy at “home” in Bosnia in many ways mirror the delays and obstructions experienced by those who choose to leave.

Countless others share Aleksa’s predicament, which has become the norm rather than the exception. Even those who at first glance seem to have “normal lives” as per Jansen’s definition often are linked to marriages wherein one partner works seasonally abroad, to children aiming to work or study abroad, to friendships recalibrated due to the distance, or in any case are stuck in the limbo in between these. Jelena and Duško relocated together to Vienna in the spring of 2023 via Duško’s Austrian-based company, only for him to get laid off the following autumn. As Jelena’s status as a “dependent” no longer was valid after Duško’s lay off, they have restarted the process in reverse: after a period of unemployment, Jelena secured a job, and Duško applied to be a dependent. With massive delays in his application, Duško used up his three months stay in the Schengen zone, and subsequently had to return to Banja Luka for three months. Although he is physically back in Vienna, Duško now returns to a state of “stuckedness,” unable to apply

⁷ Khosravi’s work references not only migration generally, but also specific experiences of forced migration and statelessness. While invoking his definition of “waiting,” I acknowledge the immense difference between chosen and forced migration, and the more extreme sense of precarity accompanying the latter.

for a work permit while his dependent visa processes, with no knowledge of when or if the dependent visa will be approved.

I recalled many nights in the autumn before the covid lockdown, when Jelena, Duško, and I would talk well into the night, discussing our youth spent in Banja Luka and our uncertain futures with or without it, mutually pondering whether or not we felt at home in a place at once so warm and so existentially difficult. Our questions about the future met at a crossroads of my quest to stay at least for the short term and their question of whether or not to work for a second time on a cruise ship in the U.S. Left without any tools other than our pontification, we decided to lower the lights and flip my deck of tarot cards in various arrangements, willing a satisfactory answer. The stakes grew higher as the questions moved towards the long term, all the more so for Jelena and Duško, who called Bosnia “home” in a concrete way, bound by family ties and passport, although I considered it “home” in a poetic sense. As we started to believe a bit in the tarot in spite of ourselves, Jelena confessed she was nervous to pose the next question. Turning the cards over in her hands, she thought awhile, then asked “Will we move to Vienna?”

When speaking in the present with both Duško and Jelena, Duško began by explaining his feelings of anger and disillusionment in his early twenties “at [his] parents, at [his] country, at sort of everything,” and felt that his desire to live up to his potential was met with opposition from all sides. He then referenced a brief period of time in Banja Luka in 2017 in which both he and Jelena were receiving stable income.

“At some point then, we started talking about what do we like to do, what are our hobbies, what do you want from this or that, and then we realized this might be one of the first times we are actually talking about this. And we realized it’s because we were given the space and the financial freedom to be like, what do I actually want to do? A lot of people don’t have that option especially in Bosnia, you go paycheck to paycheck and it’s usually not enough...now it’s a little better in Bosnia but after corona and everything the prices of everything went up. And well, that’s exactly the mindset difference that Jelena was mentioning. I feel like here [Vienna] people wouldn’t be surprised at all about that conversation. They would say yes, of course, you need your basic needs met so you can develop yourself as a person and find hobbies and enjoy things. But back home if you were to have that conversation you would be lazy or entitled or ungrateful...And I think that when people realize this and feel that sort of rejection, that’s sort of when they realize oh, I’m probably just going to leave.”

Duško also pointed to the protection of worker's rights in Austria, noting that if Jelena were to get fired or laid off as he did, her contract guarantees her three months of salaries, plus the additional six months of state unemployment. Although Duško and Jelena feel as though they are “still adjusting” and “haven't really integrated,” and even say “they are basically at the sort of low point of our life here,” they envision a future whereas in Bosnia they do not. Duško reasoned, “I think in a couple months of a little frugal living or when we have two salaries it would basically guarantee us an easy move up in our quality of life, in every way really. That's how I feel, let's see if I am right.” And in one or two years, he adds, he would have the “luxury” of choosing a career. As in Aleksa's case, the state of “waiting” has extended into the act of relocating in itself.

Jelena and Duško noted that in Banja Luka, they were always “decently comfortable,” able to find a job through their networks and their experience, to receive a decent salary and take a vacation, and to finance the mortgage on their flat. “We wouldn't be begging in the streets and our parents wouldn't be starving or anything like that. But that's not life, like Jelena said, that's just survival. Just barely living....that sort of barely living situation is a sort of bare minimum. That's your starting point, that's not your end point....in Bosnia everything is so unregulated and so messed up, and I never saw it becoming better, at least in the next 200 years, because the people are just not willing to sacrifice the bare minimum to keep it right. Maybe I'm just disappointed, but I think that people in the Balkans had to make a living with the bare minimum for so many generations that we don't know how to move forward. We just know how to survive.”

These references to survival are common, at times serving as a form of empowerment via self-stigmatization or “self-designation,” suggesting that living in the Balkans produces a strong, virile character who has precisely survived despite facing the toughest of odds (Goffman, 2022; Todorova, 1997). On the other hand, the regularity of hearing about “survival” in everyday discourse can signify what Duško means here—that the need to focus on survival has distracted people from flourishing. I heard many times some version of Duško's estimated timeline of “200 years” for overcoming this attitude of survival in Bosnia. But despite these imagined and always distant timelines for reaching “normal life,” Jelena, Duško, and my other friends are quick to say that they are materially nowhere near impoverishment and physically not in danger. As Jansen also noted in his ethnography in Dobrinja, most people in Bosnia have access to more and technologically more advanced goods than in the socialist period to which they often compare contemporary times. However, they *feel* worse off. In the current “economy of

existential mobility,” survival instinct more so implies “a brutal end to the movement associated with ‘normal lives’” —a movement that allows future imaginings (Jansen, 2014, S77).

As Duško put it while describing what he sees as the tendency of Bosnians to ostracize people from different ethnicities or of different sexual orientations, “You’re coming back to Bosnia as a Serb to Republika Srpska thinking these people are weird and wrong, these people are weird and wrong...You’re putting yourself in your own box around you where you only want to be around cis-normative people who pray to the right god. It sounds like a very 17- or 1800s point of view, where I’m gonna not move the hand of time, but actually go backward. And that’s a very worrying trend because it means you go back to Bosnia. You go back in time.” Again, temporality emerges as a metaphor that people use to make sense of their departure (or desire to depart). Many others in Jelena and Duško’s age bracket, whether they have remained in Banja Luka, left, or remain existentially in-between, depend on the possibility “of existential mobility” to obtain a sense of their lives “moving forward.” Milan T., who I have mentioned in chapter one, also related his existential stuckedness to what he sees as a mentality stuck in the time of Dayton:

“Things here haven’t changed. Nothing has healed, nothing has progressed in a higher level, so we didn’t forgive, but we especially didn’t forget. From a philosophical-moral standpoint, we are still in 1995.”

Interestingly, this temporal sense as played out in individual biographies mirrors the way that Bosnians see (and are told to see) their own broader histories—as repressed and defined by the search for temporalities beyond the “posts”: post-war, post-Dayton, post-socialism.

I remember my friend Neven telling me in 2016 as we walked home from a gig that Banja Luka is a great place to live while you are young, but it is not a place to “make a life.” This temporal anxiety exactly mirrors Todorova’s characterization of the *spatial* anxiety of living in the Balkans—a “bridge-like existence” strung across the influence of various hegemonies.⁸ Aleksa once described Todorova’s theory to me, specifically referencing Ivo Andrić, whose work *The Bridge on the River Drina* uses the bridge as a metaphor not only for Bosnia’s situatedness between “East” and “West,” but also for Bosnia’s suffering. “One of our authors described this area as a bridge,” Aleksa noted. “A very beautiful place, but it’s not a good place to live.” Duško’s, Neven’s and Aleksa’s observations on the “abnormality of life on the bridge” (in both the

⁸ See Chapter One for more discussion on Todorova and the concept of a “bridge-like existence.”

temporal and spatial dimension) are shared by many who do not see Banja Luka as a sustainable place—especially at a certain time in the trajectory of their biographies—to pursue “normal life.”

My friend Milan T., who I have mentioned in chapter one, expressed a particularly strong desire to pursue “normal life” far from Banja Luka, even expressing distaste towards many of those who had already left:

“Leaving here is what I always wanted to do. If I had a simple way to go, I would do it. I would say, ‘Bye, Dana,’ sit in a car, and go. If the helicopter came down, I would say, ‘See ya!’ But the thing is, you cannot just leave. You have to have some money and arrange a place to go...but you know, Balkan people are horrible. A lot of them, when they get to a normal country, and when they breathe the fresh air of everything working, they just proliferate, doesn’t matter if in school or business. It’s not all of them of course, but a lot of them are the same braindead Balkan people from before. They don’t learn the language after fifty years every year and I ask myself, what the fuck?”

Similarly, Milica, who I mentioned in chapter one as having been dissatisfied with her work for a political party, felt disenchanted with life in Banja Luka, citing the fact that many—almost all—of her friends had left. Out of twenty, she noticed, only one or two remained. Like Milan, she cited the pervasiveness of emigration. Speaking for her peers, she said,

“We who are here and live here, are not satisfied, and don’t have workable institutions”. Citing the gap between her accomplishments and her career, she noted, “I am thirty-six years old, not a job for me in this country, as someone who graduated from college with additional education, languages, certificates, and praise. I don’t have a job. Now what?”

With reference to her former job in the political party and their refusal to renew her contract, possibly because of her involvement in *Pravda*, Milica noted that those in power did not favor “smart people,” and willed their emigration:

This country doesn’t want smart people. They want people who don’t have their opinion and will do what they are told. These people [in the party] can buy a degree, not be educated, not be smart, and such people will stay in this system. Smart people know what’s not well done, know what’s wrong. It’s better for the government not to have these people, and that’s how people go out....

Realizing she was eligible for Croatian citizenships via her parents, she set a goal to move to Germany, already beginning her A2 German lessons and starting a job search. And yet, she finds herself in the ambivalent place of “waiting,” as did Duško and Aleksa, suspended between the

present and future visions of a new life. She handed in her application at the Croatian embassy in Sarajevo, but had already waited two years at the time of our conversation. “It’s terrible to wait. It’s gonna be two years now...and maybe two years more.”

The desire to leave, but also the suspension between worlds that results, is expressed in the lyrics of popular song by Dubioza Kolektiv, a ska-rock band from Bosnia who has been vocal in their support for *Pravda za Davida*, including a cover of David’s song “Klinac u Getu,” Their song “U.S.A.” highlights the anxious and ambiguous state that arises, as Khosravi has noted, from the moment of planning the embarkment, to the process of creating papers, to the existential considerations after the physical move has taken place.

“I am from Bosnia, take me to America

I really want to see Statue of Liberty

I can no longer wait, take me to United States

Take me to Golden Gate, I will assimilate

The grass is always greener in neighbor's courtyard

I wish to leave this nightmare, go to a promised land

Please take me to your leader, I want my green card

I want to fly over like a rocket from the Balkans

I want to start all over and turn a new page

Forget this dreadful story, escape the stone age

I'm waiting for a chance to get out of the cage

I feel like a slave on a minimal wage

...

One day when you reach the end

One day you will understand

One day back to roots, my friend

No place like a motherland

....

I hoped I'd find what I need, I'll be free like a bird

Now we're pushed in a ghetto like a sheep in a herd
 All the promises I heard became empty words
 Completely disconnected from the rest of the world

The grass is never greener in neighbor's courtyard
 I want to start all over, return to no man's land
 Send greetings to your leader, don't want your green card
 I want to fly back like a rocket to the Balkans

....

One day when you reach the end
 One day you will understand
 One day back to roots, my friend
 No place like a motherland

Starting with the dream of a better land, to which the protagonist seems happy to “assimilate,” the lyrics begin with a desire to leave “the dreadful story” of Bosnia. These sentiments have arisen in my friends’ stories here, but also previous chapters, as we have seen across the spectrum from everyday dealings with corrupt institutions to the overt resistance of *Pravda za Davida*. Similarly, the protagonist’s feeling of being stuck in a “stone age” references the temporal stuckness of personal lives as much as the feeling of historical-political stuckness in a bygone age. However, the protagonist ultimately finds life in America to be as the life of “sheep in a herd,” not so different from his life on “minimal wage” in Bosnia. Realizing these promises are empty, he finds himself even pining for the “no man’s land” of home. As we see in the refrain, the realization inevitably comes “one day” that there is “no place like a motherland.”

While Dubioza Kolektiv’s song is, in their usual manner, sung with a note of self-irony, it is a revealing work of political commentary. Well known across Banja Luka, I have even heard the song shouted gleefully by my students while teaching there in 2013; indeed, it was the most fitting response when I said I was from America. I have offered the song “U.S.A.” as a popular representation of the in-betweenness of desiring to leave, and I hope that I have highlighted the trajectories of the individual lives of my informants, and their quests for “normal lives.” I have highlighted the complexity of their decision to leave, and did not mean to depoliticize them by suggesting they have “abandoned” the cause of a better Bosnia. Those I have mentioned here

who have already left or set into motion the process of leaving of course cite frustration with state corruption as a catalyst. When I asked what Jelena missed about Bosnia, she explained that she missed the idea of Banja Luka more than the reality. “I’m kind of romanticizing Bosnia until I go there and see some messed up stuff that I forgot about.” She also worries that myopic attitudes, especially anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment, are on the rise, and considers that had she remained, she would at least represent a more open-minded part of society.

Of course, the *Pravdaši* have enumerated and fought against the greatest issues posed by the current state and cannot be said to be apolitical subjects. Still, frustration overtakes even Sofija. In early spring of 2022 at one of the daily protests, Sofija admitted in a rare moment of dejection, “That’s it. I’m leaving Bosnia. Pravda [justice] is not coming.” We shuffled in the still-early onset of the twilight towards Davidov Trg and sung David’s song in spite of her doubts.

4.4 On staying, and fighting

The affect of anger and its role as a “social” emotion can manifest as fight as much as flight, and sits alongside many emotions which the subject cannot always know or articulate in the present (Ahmed, 2004). Loyalty to their larger goal in spite or *inat* of disappointments renders the remaining members of Pravda able to continue. As I explained in chapter 2, the *Pravdaši* formed a small group by the time of my fieldwork. Many of the bodies that previously assembled in the square—and at the protests’ height, had spread far beyond the square’s borders—had left Banja Luka. The remaining dissenters had adopted quieter means of fighting that stretched beyond the usual definitions, including legal proceedings with the support of Ifet Feraget and mourning by way of ritualistic meeting and singing at the square and at the mouth of the *Crkvena* and *Vrba*s rivers. Eventually, as the daily singing shifted entirely to the river-side site far from the center, and court dates became less frequent or shifted to Sarajevo, material traces of the protests remain in the square. Stickers still line the wall on *Davidov Trg* opposite *krivi sat*, the crooked clock monument erected in memory of the 1969 earthquakes, from which the black outline of David’s face stares straight ahead as if to challenge the viewer from behind his pair of shades and halo of dreadlocks. And although David’s heart memorial has moved to the mouth of the *Crkvena* and *Vrba*s rivers (where it is only slightly safer from periodical demolition by the state), a permanent outline of the heart now has been graffitied on the concrete ground of the square. After years of the state attempting to erase the memory of David’s murder—and the still unresolved case—everyday Banjalukans still walk over the heart and the concentric repetition of “PRAVDA PRAVDA PRAVDA...” that surrounds it.

As I have discussed in chapter 3, the remaining *Pravdaši* themselves exemplify the decision to stay in Bosnia and to fight. Their presence in itself, especially for Sofija and Ozren as movement leaders, stirs up a kind of reverence in non-*Pravdaši* Banjalukans that shows even through their silence. As Sandra often told me, while many declined to show or to state their support out of fear, most Banjalukans found in the *Pravdaši*'s presence a mirror for the truth. While I heard occasional derogatory whispers about their efforts, I also witnessed a degree of shame that they had not taken part themselves in the critique of the state that *Pravda* came to encapsulate.

Ironically, it is the *Pravdaši*, who feel the violence of the corrupt state most heavily, who are the least afraid to fight for an improved Bosnia. Their intense emotions of disgust, disappointment, and sorrow aroused by David's death are somehow only a hair's breadth away from positive feelings of dedication to the fight. This is seen in Sofija's immediate return from Switzerland to join Davor at the movement's inception, and her choice to stay despite alternate imagined futures that relate significantly to those of my previously mentioned friends:

“My whole life I was moving, I was never on one place. Or I lived with mother, then with father, then my sister, always something. I was married, I live there, then I get divorced. It's always like that. I'm always traveling, I don't know how, it's just the way. Spontaneous, and that's the best thing, believe me, everything continues, what you do, it's right...and everything what happens must happen, because it would not happen if it doesn't. but I know how you feel But now in the last few months before corona I was thinking I will go from here, I will try to go to Vienna maybe to study my master or find a job...or I will go to the sea to work to get some money...And then I was like man, I don't go nowhere. I will fight for justice till the end. Now I will stay on the street and fight, I don't care if I don't have a job. I don't care about this or that, if I get arrested, I will fight. And I feel so... easier? Relieved.”

Operating outside of the usual definitions of “activism,” it could be said that staying in Bosnia *in itself* constitutes a form of resistance, and perhaps even a protest. While like many, my friend Dario sees *Pravda*'s creation of a political party as a repetition of corrupt power dynamics, he “will not leave because he is not the kind of person who does not fight back.” A filmmaker with many friends from the University of Banja Luka theater faculty, he wants to develop a program to fund artists and has since taken over *Žižka*, one of Banja Luka's only “alternative” and LGBTQIA friendly bars.

Stefan (the friend who assisted me in the creation of my visa) after a period of working in Italy, chose as Sofija did to return to Banja Luka. A refugee from Croatia, he has lived in many cities. “But none of them feel like home how this feels like home,” he confessed from behind a cigarette one of the nights we stayed up scrapping together papers for my visa at *Topolino* café. “Why not make this place that feels like home, a place where it is possible to stay, and be home?” he asked. I walked back to my flat that night unsure of our master plan for the visa but struck by Stefan’s affinity for Banja Luka that I had not heard him express before.

Many months after, with both visa and covid anxieties well behind me, I found a similar sentiment in two new friends in their early thirties, Marko and Bojan. Both garrulous and quick to divulge in philosophical topics with me ranging from mental health to the Pravda movement, they made it easy to spend the day with them. After acquiring a nice tan (or burn) at *Aquana* city pool, we continued our discussions at Suzana’s pizzeria in the late-setting sun and unrelenting heat, and afterwards at Marko’s flat. It felt impossible to cut short the unplanned *ćejf*⁹. As the air in the flat grew thick with cigarette smoke, they came out to me as a gay couple, something they have kept from friends and most members of their family. Marko explained the abuse he has endured for his sexual orientation and his “feminine personality,” disclosing that he “was even thrown in the trash can at school.”

These memories were painful to hear, and evoked the close-mindedness and violence that undoubtedly form a crucial part of Banjalukan society. Still, Marko and Bojan’s thoughts towed a tenuous line between rejection and adoration of their city. With eyes shining, they told me about the first drag show in Banja Luka, which was held months before in secret at Incel, an alternative club located some four kilometers from the city center—a far distance by Banja Luka standards. As they detailed that night’s performance of the drag queens, the music, and the general atmosphere of freedom, it was clear that their hope in the potential of the local LGBTQ community overrode their fear for its safety. “We want to make this our place, and make it good for ourselves,” Marko added after a long period of reflective silence. “We love Banja Luka, and we want to fight for it.”

⁹ *Ćejf* eludes translation, but is best described as leisure with deep and intentional pleasure involved, even when the activity described is a minor ritual such as sipping coffee.

4.5 On love and the local

Before leaving Budapest for fieldwork, my colleague gifted me one of the novels by our friend Lana Bastašić¹⁰, in which Sandra, her childhood friend, apparently served as inspiration for the main characters. On the inner front cover, she left a note that made more sense at my fieldwork's close than at its start.

“To love, is to let to be hurt, because, how do we know that we feel pain if we haven't loved before? Balkan is going to hurt you deeply. There is no such a cruel place in the world. Let it (him, us) do it because there is no pain as big as the love Balkan gives.”

Reading the inscription now brings to mind the duality and ambiguity faced by both groups of my informants, the *Pravdaši* and my peers struggling to define their place of “belonging.” The affect of love is famously difficult to define, and loving and belonging may invoke pain as much as it invokes feelings of security. Perhaps we can extrapolate Žižek's words from a spoken lecture about loving *someone* to loving some *place*: “If you have reasons to love someone, you do not love them” (Žižek, 2021). The Todorovan “bridge-like existence,” riddled with irrationality, may in fact lend itself to close interpersonal connection which, whether characterized by joy or pain, is inherent to love.

Thus, love of place could be said to depend on proximity to and knowledge of the people, which I will define as “the local.” In a conversation with Tihomor Dakić, an environmentalist and activist with Banja Luka's Center for Environment, we both came upon the exceptionality of the Pravda movement as locally born and supported. On the lack of involvement from intranational organizations, he said with distaste:

“I'm not sure if they're doing this on purpose, or because of their ignorance. If it's ignorance, they are incapable. If it's on purpose, they are evil. Not evil, but they are not fair. I mean, I found what you said really interesting about the patronizing aspect of it. The absence of belief that there could be like a locally born movement, you know? And it kind of seems to me that, for instance, if you look at *Pravda*, that in many ways it was the most powerful local cause in decades. And then it's also the one that doesn't receive support. No. Because it, like everything else, as you said, is like strung in these crossroads. And there are a million actors that could have gotten involved, but it's the only thing that they will not get involved...”

¹⁰ See *Uhvati Zeca* or *Catch the rabbit* in English translation. Bastašić, L. (2022). *Catch the rabbit*. Picador.

“Strung in the crossroads,” thus eluding definition and control, but also proper support, a locally born movement like Pravda at least stands out for its authenticity. As someone who fought for years to remedy the environmental issues of Republika Srpska both from within Bosnia and at EU-level policymaking meetings in Brussels, Tihomir also noted his Brussels colleagues’ lack of local knowledge.

“But when someone asks you, we are from Bosnia and Herzegovina. And then foreigners have many interesting thoughts. ‘Are you from Bosnia and Herzegovina? Are you a Muslim?’ I said no. I’m Serb. ‘You’re from Serbia.’ No, I’m from Bosnia and Herzegovina. ‘How come? You escaped from Serbia?’ And I said, fuck, for God’s sake...”

Not unlike Marko and Bojan, Tihomir expressed a sort of calling to stay within Banja Luka and to be one of those who molds his home in his image of a livable society. Rejecting the material concerns of some who have emigrated, he said, “The job will always be, but people are more important. We will manage, but we have to connect, to bind together.” And without prompting, he alluded to the bridge-like temporality of the current political situation: “We have some ideas, always too early or too late. Like democratic socialism in Yugoslavia. But we are here and we need to do our best. It’s a beautiful country.”

In terms of resistance, such love for Banja Luka can be a potent force. As Aleksandar Trifunović, editor of the independent newspaper BUKA wrote on a Facebook post in the fall of 2021,

“I’ve been trying for decades to understand what the final goal of this criminal, brutal, and demolishing policy that this country has been ruled by a quarter of a century since war...The goal is to lead such a policy that will make everyone who loves this country think of leaving here and never coming back. The goal is therefore to create people who do not care about this country with such politics, and then it is completely irrelevant whether you went from it physically to external migration, or you retreated into yourself, into internal migration... That’s why love is the minimum resistance to whatever you do from this country, no matter how disgusting this politics, or whoever led it. Never stop loving this country and never give up on this beautiful country, because that’s the only thing these people fear. Do you get it?”

His feeling, resulting from years of covering corruption and violence including David’s murder, encapsulates the affect of love as the fulcrum of “belonging,” regardless of whether one has

physically left Bosnia or not. As illustrated by his post, palpable frustration with the state can co-exist with a powerful—and loyal—love of the local. Mirrored in *Pravda za Davida*’s slogan, “Kroz smrt životom, kroz mržnju ljubavlju,” or, “Through death, life, through hate, love,” the duality of hate and love does not form a contradiction as such. Rather, the intensity of both affects produces a sense of closeness that may, in itself, define “belonging”—and is fundamental to the concept of *narod*. As Begoña Aretxaga has written, “The very concept at the heart of the nation, “the people,” becomes an object of fear and violence by a state that wants to have absolute control of a nation it is at once dividing and destroying: (Aretxaga, 2005, p. 259). It is precisely these concepts of *narod* and heart (*srdce*) that drive, in spite of the state, the affect behind life on the bridge.

Conclusion

As I conclude my dissertation, I am revisiting the themes of formal and informal resistance, and especially of hope and hopelessness, in real time. My writing takes place behind a disturbing backdrop of political developments in Banja Luka and beyond. Daily (hourly or minute-to-minute may be better descriptors) news updates from across the world reveal an ongoing trend towards authoritarianism, from my native U.S. to the Balkans. My phone has become a flurry of dispatches in the form of texts, screenshots, articles, TikToks and Reels, leaving little time to process the unfolding nightmare—and also, as I will explain, some moments of striking optimism.

In Banja Luka, Dodik has suggested that he will issue mining permits to American companies interested in lithium deposits near the Serbian border, among other nods to cooperation with the Trump-Musk oligarchy. Since the U.S. election, Dodik can be seen regularly sporting a “Make America Great Again” hat and has illuminated the walls of the Palace of Republika Srpska with the words “Republika Srpska congratulations Trump 2024” interspersed with the visage of Trump himself. Emboldened by Trump’s rapid onslaught of extra-constitutional measures and embrace of Putin, Dodik has taken a 180 degree turn from his usual anti-American rhetoric.

But on February 26th, Dodik was sentenced for disobeying the Office of the High Representative to one year in prison and a six-year ban on holding presidential office. In return, *Republika Srpska* passed laws that ban the state police of Bosnia (the State Investigation and Protection or SIPA) from exercising their power in the entity, hence blocking them from enforcing the ban. As the political crisis mounts, Pravda activists like Ozren express their relief at this gesture towards justice:

“We stopped at the square in the center of Banja Luka and addressed the media. And this is what Dodik and his scum did to us: handcuffs to our hands. However, we did not run away, we did not threaten, we were not protected by armed ‘people.’ It is finished, Milorad. The wheel of fortune is turning.”

On March 12, the Bosnian state issued an arrest warrant for Dodik, as well as Prime Minister Radovan Višković and Assembly Speaker Nenad Stevandić, citing an “attack on constitutional order” (Kurtic, 2025). But the Republika Srpska police claims that they have not received an order to arrest. If Dodik, Stevandić, and Višković continue to resist detention, an Interpol warrant may follow, leaving citizens of the R.S. in a state of everyday uncertainty as to what will

come next. Sandra tells me that the possibility of impending violence is a regular subject of discussion in the classes she teaches; one student regularly tells her with a twinge of dark humor, “See you next week, unless the war starts.” More than ever, *Republika Srpska* emerges as a battleground for the interests of the U.S., E.U., NATO and Russia, suspended in the “bridge-like existence” and vulnerable to Dodik’s manipulative narratives of “protecting” the citizens of *Republika Sprska* from outside influence.

At the same time, protests in neighboring Serbia show that resistance is alive.

Last November, a canopy collapsed at the Novi Sad train station, killing fifteen people and injuring others. Suspicion arose that the canopy’s recent renovation, undertaken by a team of Chinese companies with vested interest in the redevelopment of the Budapest-Belgrade railway, did not respect safety standards. As in the case of David’s murder, this tragedy became symbolic of the failures of the state to protect its people against corruption, and caused the long-held resentment towards Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić to boil over into the streets. Students from across Serbia, joined by everyday people, held a series of marches across hundreds of kilometers to show their support; in the largest protest on March 15 in Belgrade, footage of students limping their final steps to the capital and embracing one another in tear-drenched faces, flooded social media. While the Serbian government reported 107,000 attendees, independent monitors reported 325,000—and friends of mine on the ground claimed that estimates from drone footage reached 1 million (De Launey, 2025).

In one instance during the March 15 protest, a deafening sound rolled through the crowd, bringing protesters to their knees. Videos circulated quickly across social media depicting the sudden parting of the crowd and shouts of terror, and later gave voice to victims suffering from headaches and hearing problems long after the sonic attack (Statement on the use of Sonic Weapons, 2025). One photo emerged of a large device fixed to the hood of a police car resembling an American-made LRAD 450 long-range acoustic weapon, resulting in 590,000 people adding their name to a petition calling for an international investigation (Kassam, A., 2025). But the interior minister publicly denied the device’s use as a sound cannon, and Vučić’s narrative quickly painted the protesters and petition signatories alike as “destroying Serbia” (Serbia Police Issue Fresh Denial, 2025).

In a global moment characterized by insecurity and also weariness to resist, these students became exemplars. Protests of solidarity emerged in several other European capitals. At the protest I attended in Budapest, a small group stood together in front of the Serbian embassy on Hero’s Square. Surrounded by Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian language, and also direct eye contact

and acknowledgment of strangers, I felt transported to the huddled groups of the *Pravda za Davida* gatherings, whose embodied participation, even in moments of quiet and of mourning, somehow spoke louder than the sound of the masses.

Still, as my Macedonian friend Iva and I approached, we were at first confused by the silence, asking one another who was leading the group, where were the chants, was this a protest? It then dawned on us that these were the minutes of silence for the victims of the Novi Sad train station tragedy. Unable to tell when the fifteen minutes, one for each victim, had begun, we found ourselves suspended in a sea of unmeasurable silence, glancing back and forth between our comrades and up towards the embassy facade, which met us with the same silence in return. Finally, a few Serbian students, backgrounded by Hungarian students holding signs of solidarity, called for justice via a megaphone. As our shouts grew louder, one figure emerged at the window of the embassy, only to lift both of his middle fingers towards our group. Made somehow more antagonistic by nature of his face hovering just behind the top of the window, his gesture provoked cries of disdain but also jeering and laughter from the protesters. As in Banja Luka, there was a relief in collectivity, first in the silence of mourning, but also through our spite against the spectre of the state, embodied in this case by middle fingers.

After I came home from the protest, I spoke with many friends from the region. Strahinja, a young activist from Čačak, Serbia, expressed full confidence that the regime will change. “I’m glad you are protesting too! It will give you the right to claim our citizenship when we change the government!” My friend and fellow academic, Tijana from Kragujevac, Serbia, echoed my feeling that this protest counters the general malaise felt in other parts of the world towards the rise of fascism. “The world is upside down, but for the first time in ages, I have actual hope that change is coming for the better.” Most significantly, I received texts and pictures from Jelena and Duško from the allied protest in Vienna. Previously having some reservations about attending protests, Jelena now said, “It was so emotional...the fifteen minutes of silence [held for the fifteen victims of the collapse]. I cried and felt like a part of something bigger. So many mixed emotions, still processing...I was so hopeless, but new generations being fearless is giving me hope. It is shy and I don’t trust it, but it is there somewhere.”

Across news and social media images of the protests in Serbia, one can see some students and their supporters sporting the same *Pravda za Davida* t-shirts worn by the *Pravdaši*, with David’s face looking on confidently. Meanwhile in Banja Luka, bitterness towards Vučić merged with bitterness towards Dodik—just as overwhelming care for the students protesting in Serbia merged with care for the youth of Banja Luka and their futures—and students at the University

of Banja Luka organized protests in support of their Serbian peers. Meanwhile, alongside messages of support for the protesters in Serbia, Davor posts regularly on the *Pravda za Davida* Facebook group, “See you at 5:00 at David’s heart” and “Pravda za Davida!” alongside pictures of the latest landscaping of the memorial on the *Crkvena* and *Vrba*s rivers. His words, written seven years after David’s death, are a testament to David’s undying memory while the *Pravdaši* still wait for justice.

While obviously intertwined with the protests in Serbia, Davor’s words symbolize a different kind of movement, one that has lasted beyond the days of mass participation and now exists as a space of collective mourning and care. I have illustrated in this dissertation the ways in which resistance in the *Pravda za Davida* movement takes on an affective character whether in times of hope and doubt, and described how this intense affect drives the creation of close relations that in themselves resist the hatred of the regime. I have used the story of David and the resulting *Pravda za Davida* movement as a case of the direct violence of the state and of the condemnation of that violence, and used this as a starting point from which to delve into how the broader Banja Luka society experiences corruption. As with the *Pravdaši*, their manner of coping with corruption is not passive but instead imbued with agency and importantly, a demonstrable desire to develop relations of friendship and care against the neglectful institutions of the state. Finally, I have addressed how these bonds of friendship and care, central to the idea of “home” and “homemaking,” complicate the decision facing the Bosnian youth of whether to stay or leave their country. Throughout, I have centered Banja Luka as my fieldsite – a place where “the bridge like existence” of the Balkans is made all the more extreme by the political instability of the pseudo-state of *Republika Srpska*.

In the Introduction, I have defined Banja Luka and situated it within the broader *Republika Srpska* and Bosnia and Herzegovina. I hope that this, along with an explication of previous protests in the city, has set the *Pravda za Davida* movement in historical context. I also hope that it has given a spatio-geographical context to Banja Luka that illuminates some of the reasons behind its current instability. Following the history of other recent protests, I explained David’s murder, the immediate response of his family, and the protests that took place prior to my fieldwork period proper. After defining my methodology as based on friendship and my relationship with my informants as deeply relational, I have offered a brief vignette regarding my entry into the field and the creation of my visa, a process which resulted in my shifting positionality (depending on observer) throughout the fieldwork as an activist anthropology taking part in the *Pravda za Davida* movement, or a spy seeking to subvert *Republika Srpska*. The anxieties inherent in this positionality gave rise to vulnerability that I used as a strength rather

than a weakness—as a means of constituting genuine friendships. Finally, I situated my work within the anthropological and sociological literature on Bosnia and explained the theoretical underpinnings of my thesis firstly by tracing their genealogies, then by justifying my choice of centering the concept of “love.” I suggested the possibility of “affective resistance” as a relationship-based and at times covert means of subverting power. Moreover, I link my affect-driven definition of love to Azra Hromadžić’s concept of “riverine love” and “riverine citizenship,” both of which privilege *place*-based citizenship over state-based citizenship, and in doing so, oppose the typically defined nationalism so often associated with the region.

In Chapter One, “A Bridge-like Existence: Theoretical Underpinnings,” I begin with a deep look into the metaphor of the “bridge” derived from Maria Todorova’s well-known *Imagining the Balkans*. I argued that contemporary Banja Luka, de facto capital of the insecure and politically unstable *Republika Srpska*, well illustrates the bridge-like existence of the Balkans, perhaps offering the best representation of the metaphor. I then explain the evolution of *Republika Srpska* and how its origins in war gave way to current iterations of corruption and profiteering, amounting to an “underworld” of criminal activity deeply intertwined with the reigning political party. Ethnographically, my informants from inside and outside the political party share their stories of coping with corruption, as well as finding alternative and even beautiful definitions of Banja Luka.

In Chapter Two, “Pravda za Davida: Hope and Mourning Against the State,” I turn to more “overt” resistance, offering ethnographic accounts of the meetings, protests, and campaigning of the community of Pravda activists or “Pravdaši” who remain committed to the Pravda za Davida movement. I gave focus to my friendship-based methodology, and moreover to the friendships I took part in and perceived among the *Pravdaši*, both in triumphant and depressing moments. Avoiding a teleological approach of “success” or “failure,” I instead took an alternative approach that highlights both hope and mourning as openings for political action and trans-ethnic collaboration.

In Chapter Three, “Whose Corruption? Violence from Above and *Narod* from Below,” I have ethnographically explored the corrupt overreach of the dominant political party SNSD and the police beyond the case of Pravda za Davida. On the other hand, I tell the stories of Banjalukans finding creative and relational means of coping with corruption, and find that the trans-ethnic *narod* or “nation” of everyday people derives power from this informality. Drawing from the idea of “social personhood,” I explain how “favors” create relationships, love, and community, and constitute more than a mere survival mechanism.

In Chapter Four, “Where is ‘home’? Uncertain Futures and the Question of Belonging,” I have connected the issues explored in the preceding chapters to the massive contemporary problem of emigration in today’s Bosnia. Referring to the concept of a “bridge-like existence,” I found that it is an existence not only spread between geographic hegemonies, but also in between temporalities of past and future. Through conversations both with friends remaining in Banja Luka and those who have moved, I found that their conflicting feelings could be described through the concept of “love” and its inherently intense and contradictory affects.

Ultimately, this dissertation has addressed concepts of love, friendship, and home, as well as resistance, the state, and hope and hopelessness. Its contribution lies firstly in its use of Banja Luka as a field site. Despite Banja Luka’s relevance to many social and political phenomena in the region, especially Serb nationalism and Republika Srpska as a pawn of Russian interests, it has not been prominent in the literature. Moreover, I believe that the dark history of Banja Luka’s elites and their role in the Bosnian war has led many to overlook the perspectives of Banjalukans on the ground. I have tried to show here their resistant potential against the state and beyond ethnonational interest.

Its contribution also lies in its approach to a social movement that privileges non-teleological and relational approaches. I hope that my methodology of creating and maintaining genuine friendships has echoed the theories and concepts of friendship and love that I have utilized throughout the dissertation, and that it will prove useful for those embarking on a similar task.

Scholars of Bosnia, and of social movements and everyday life throughout the Balkans, can use my approach and findings to supplement their work. Beyond those studying the Balkans, my audience may include those studying social movements centered around politically driven murders, and the resulting processes of mourning and resentment, such as the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S.A.

Further studies might analyze the present protests in Serbia, which are brimming with affective relations between young people that choose the hopeful perspective, and between neighbors and friends beyond the students themselves brought together under a new cause. Like *Pravda za Davida*, symbolized everywhere by heart-shaped stickers, the heart-shaped memorial removed from the main square, and the second heart-shaped memorial constantly reconstructed where David’s body was found, the movement in Serbia reveals uncountable hearts in each march. Linguistically, the overarching slogan “*pumpaj*” or “pump it,” as well as minor slogans like “*nemoj da je neko spustio tenziju*” or “don’t let anyone lower the tension” carry the theme of a pumping

heart surviving the tensions brought on by an authoritarian regime. Love, an inherently affective and contradictory feeling, remains characteristic of “the abnormality of life on the bridge.”

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