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# perspectives

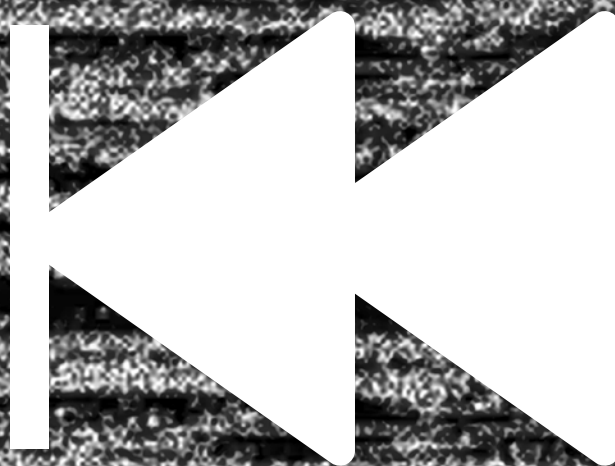
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POLITICAL ANALYSES AND COMMENTARY

SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

## THE PAST IS NOW

Politics of Denial and Dealing with  
the Past in the Western Balkans





## Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung

Fostering democracy and upholding human rights, taking action to prevent the destruction of the global ecosystem, advancing equality between women and men, securing peace through conflict prevention in crisis zones, and defending the freedom of individuals against excessive state and economic power – these are the objectives that drive the ideas and actions of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. We maintain close ties to the German Green Party (Alliance 90/The Greens) and as a think tank for green visions and projects, we are part of an international network encompassing well over 100 partner projects in approximately 60 countries.

The Heinrich Böll Foundation works independently and nurtures a spirit of intellectual openness. We maintain a worldwide network with currently 30 international offices.

Our work in Southeast Europe concentrates on the democratization process, political education, and environmental protection and sustainable development.

We support and open public fora about topical and marginalized social-political issues and we enable networking of local and international actors close to the Green values.

# contents

- 2** unclosed chapters of the past  
Nino Lejava
- 3** facing the past in the post-Yugoslav space  
Tamara Šmidling
- 9** the past is still someone's present  
Vildana Selimbegović
- 14** why the facts matter  
Bekim Blakaj
- 17** Serbia: nationalism without alternative and politics of memory without self-reflection  
Milivoj Bešlin
- 20** Bosnia and Herzegovina: three decades of facing the past  
Lejla Gačanica
- 23** Croatia: facts about the past in the shadow of victorious narratives  
Branka Vierda
- 26** Kosovo: wartime memories challenged by the courts  
Una Hajdari
- 29** Montenegro: is there anything to remember at all?  
Miloš Vukanović
- 33** North Macedonia: amnesty and silence around the 2001 insurgency  
Prof. dr Irena Stefoska
- 36** towards politics of hope: an interview with Orli Fridman  
Miloš Ćirić
- 40** the case of Prijedor: struggle for victims' recognition  
Edin Ramulić
- 43** decades of women-led initiatives for peace  
Marijana Stojčić
- 46** the media: from tools of war to vehicles of denial  
Dinko Gruhonjić
- 50** efforts to deconstruct the hateful narratives  
Aleksandra Bosnić Đurić
- 53** the war in the classrooms  
Srđan Milošević, Aleksandar R. Miletić
- 56** imposition of legal standards and their sustainability  
Selma Korjenić, Ajna Mahmić
- 59** a critique of western-funded memorialization initiatives in the Balkans  
Jasmin Mujanović
- 62** the clash of the myths  
Mirko Medenica
- 66** on populism and historical revisionism  
Thomas Schad
- 70** the future without remembrance  
Dragan Markovina

# unclosed chapters of the past

Nino Lejava

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There may come a time when it is no longer considered politically opportune to give the crimes of the past the names they deserve; only then will we be able to prove how much freedom is worth to us.

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*Heinrich Böll, From: The Price of Reconciliation, speech, 1959*

After the devastating wars on the territory of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, in recent decades, we have observed that the (re)construction of national historiographies is also driving societies further and further apart.

The Belgrade and Sarajevo offices of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, together with our editor Miloš Ćirić, have invited relevant voices to reflect on what was achieved over the past decades in the fields of documentation, memorialization, and processing of recent history. We wanted to learn which actors and factors determine the cultural context, who could deconstruct the hate narratives, how nationalism affects the culture of remembrance in the respective societies, and why the most brutal of experiences did not lead to a better understanding of common history in the region. In this volume, the role of the external actors is also critically questioned: what were Western donors able to achieve? Why has dealing with history never become mainstream despite the efforts of many brave, consistent and professional individuals? Is there even a need for a moratorium on dealing with the past so that new spaces for peaceful coexistence can emerge?

In his seminal treatise on Eastern Europe “Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin”, which was published in

2010, historian Timothy Snyder describes the First World War as a Pandora’s box that determined the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century during its first half: expulsions, nationalism, deportations, genocide, class war, starvation as a weapon, concentration camps, etc. If one continues to stretch this arc of man-made disaster towards Southeast Europe, one will find that this line unfortunately ran until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with all the horrors that took place between ethnic groups, denominations and societies of the post-Yugoslav countries.

In the past few decades, Europe has gone through many phases in coming to terms with its own history of violence of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This chapter is still not closed and is being reopened as a deep wound in Eastern Europe, in Ukraine.

The experience of violence in the 1990s not only continues to have an impact on the subconscious of the people in the region which is often somewhat amorphously described as “Western Balkans”, but also on the social and political structures.

Despite the gloomy picture drawn in this publication, coming to terms with the region’s traumatic history could be an essential contribution to European unification. With this publication, we hope to provide an impulse to that end. ■■■

# facing the past in the post-Yugoslav space

Tamara Šmidling

More than thirty years have passed since the beginning of the wars on the territory of the former Socialist Federal Yugoslavia, and during those three decades, what was once a common state and homeland for millions of people of different ethnic and religious identities was transformed into a so-called *region*, a nebulous term that owes its wide acceptance precisely to the absence of any precision and weight related to geography, values, and ideology. Fragments of a country, its concrete history, political and social organization are thus united by a tepid definition, one which is not close to anyone's heart, but doesn't offend anyone either, at least not too much.

What exactly are the characteristics of that *region*, what is it that decisively marks and determines it? Various answers to this question are certainly possible, and one of the most obvious ones is the experience of violence and trauma which it caused, and which this part of Europe and the world was affected by in a series of wars and armed conflicts fought during the 1990s. The experiences of direct and structural violence, most often organized, designed and implemented by the state against the citizens of that same state (or states) or against the population of neighboring states, directly shaped a huge part of the social, political and cultural landscape of what we call *the region* today. As traumatic as the violence committed during the wars itself was, the post-war period is almost equally painful and traumatic, i.e., the way in which the states created by the collapse of the SFRY handled (or refused to handle) the difficult legacy of violence from their past.

In the text that follows, an attempt is made to establish a basic sketch of the

process most often referred to as "Facing the past" in the post-Yugoslav space, and an attempt is made to present the situation in the various countries created by the disintegration of the SFRY. The focus of this piece is not to insist on the specifics of each individual context (which is certainly discussed in much more detail and in a more informed way in other texts in the collection), but on finding and pointing out some common tendencies and trends in the way our societies have faced their (violent) past, but also how they reworked, suppressed, and ideologically processed it in accordance with what Todor Kuljić calls "the hegemonic epochal consciousness" in the field of mnemonic struggle (Kuljić, 2021). The present text also does not pretend to provide a comprehensive overview of the inexhaustible conceptual cacophony that appears every time one tries to think about the relationship of a society to its own violent past. Important differences between the concepts of dealing with the past, transitional justice, memory politics, memorial culture, political use of the past, retributive and restorative justice remain beyond the scope of this text, which instead devotes attention to the dominant memory politics of the "nineties", what those policies emphasize, but also, to an even greater extent, what they omit, and how that more or less conspicuous absence speaks equally strongly about where we are as a society today and where we want to be. That is because collective memory is not monolithic, and social reality is a space in which different memories "always touch, amplify, intersect, modify, polarize with other memories and impulses of forgetting" (Assman, 2011).

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## the heavy burden of transitional (in)justice

The wars fought in the post-Yugoslav region claimed more than 130,000 human lives, several million people were expelled from their homes, permanently or temporarily displaced, hundreds of thousands of people survived various forms of psychological and physical torture and abuse, thousands of women and men were raped. It is estimated that tens of thousands of people directly participated in the commission of various forms of violence, from murder to various forms of torture. The psychological consequences of war, hunger, poverty, losing one's home and job, as well as general existential insecurity are almost impossible to assess.

The material destruction was also massive, and definitive and reliable estimates of the economic damage were never made. Multiple acts of violence were thus committed against the former citizens of Yugoslavia, and only some of its forms became the subject of domestic and international institutions that had (or still have) a mandate to deal with war crimes and their consequences. The model of transitional justice, already more or less successfully applied in other so-called "post-conflict" societies (such as the Republic of South Africa, Chile, Argentina), was still the dominant model during the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Its main proponents were representatives of the

international community, the competent authorities of the states created by the disintegration of the SFRY (usually only as far as was considered necessary for progressing on the desired path toward the promised "bright future" inside the European Union) and parts of civil society (non-governmental organizations, associations of victims' families, various informal groups and initiatives) interested in applying this model in confronting our societies with their violent past for different reasons and with different goals.

Four rights (which mainly concern victims and their family members) serve as the foundation and the desired outcome of the application of this model: the right to the truth, the right to justice, the right to reparations and the right to non-repetition are stated (Toma, 2019).

From a distance of three decades from the outbreak of the wars, it can be argued that the application of this model has yielded rather poor results, or at least has been less successful than was expected in the early 2000s. Some of the reasons for this failure are already contained in the inherent limitations of this concept: a) a strong focus on the state and its institutions in this process implies neglect of what is happening in society, i.e., the "base"; b) an often technical approach focusing on "checking the box", i.e. fulfilling various formal requirements, without insight (often expressly avoiding insight) on how certain required and implemented mechanisms are perceived and reflected in specific



*Nebojša Beat Nenadić,  
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communities, in specific political and economic circumstances; c) maintaining the status quo and not questioning the power relations created in the very process of implementing transitional justice.

In the post-Yugoslav region, this model has proven to be unsuccessful both for the reasons mentioned above and because of what Jelena Subotić called the syndrome of “kidnapped justice” (Subotić, 2010). Namely, it is a situation where “respect for international norms becomes a strategic and even subversive choice for states that have no intention of respecting them” (ibid.). This approach was particularly characteristic for the beginning of the 2000s, when the regimes of warlords and fathers of nations Franjo Tuđman and Slobodan Milošević were replaced by new political forces which at the time were commonly referred to as “democratic”. The high expectations of a part of the political, cultural and academic public related to the oncoming wave of “facing the past” quickly evaporated. It soon became clear that the declared willingness to acknowledge the suffering of others and adopt an ethically acceptable attitude towards the past are not exactly in line with current political practices, and especially with the bargaining that was constantly taking place on this issue between local political groups and representatives of the international community. A decade of this opportunistic and calculating attitude towards the past was replaced by an increasingly pronounced ethnocentric refusal to continue to deal with this issue. In Serbia, for instance, the Serbian Progressive Party came to power in 2012. There has since been a visible shift towards treating the 1990s not as an unpleasant burden and ethical ballast that should be lived with somehow, as painlessly as possible, but as a decade of heroic struggles for the preservation and maintenance of what are considered to have been legitimate national goals. The “nineties” interpreted in such a way are no longer a neuralgic dark stain on the national past, but an era of simultaneous heroism and martyrdom during which primarily the Serbian people suffered. According to this narrative, now is the time to publicly, openly and unequivocally acknowledge that suffering and make it visible in public spaces.

Advocacy for an ethically correct, politically progressive and comprehensive confrontation with the past has thus never

gained widespread social support in any post-Yugoslav country. The wars continued after the end of armed violence, on the mnemonic battlefields, where a “civil war of memory” is still being fought (Kuljić, 2006). Each national group strives to organize the official order of remembrance in a way that will homogenize and give meaning to that group, but will also outline the direction that group wants to go in the future. These official orders of memory in the post-Yugoslav regions are mostly based on the systematic and comprehensive collective victimization of one’s own ethnicity, even when they contain elements of a heroic, victorious, celebratory narrative. It is crucial that victims, martyrs, and perpetrators are simultaneously, and not by chance, bound up into one homogenous category<sup>1</sup>. As long as they belong to the same ethnic group, all these different categories, with extremely different and even opposing experiences, are perceived as “one”, as victims and as a light that stands against the darkness of the “other”, who are all perpetrators of violence, regardless of the diversity of their positions and roles during and after the war.

In each of the countries created by the disintegration of the SFRY, there are marginalized and often stigmatized minority communities of memory trying to consolidate and affirm alternative narratives about the events of the past. These activist groups mainly deal with the burden of so-called “unwanted memories” (Fridman, 2022), seeking to expand public spaces and the corpus of public knowledge with facts and interpretations of various events that contradict official, hegemonic narratives. These are very heterogeneous groups made up of activists, camp survivors, war veterans, and members of the academic community. The motivations and ideological and political positions from which these groups do their activist and political work are different, but so are their material base and economic power. Therefore, it would be incorrect to assume that their ultimate goals are the same. Although almost all of these groups see themselves as marginalized, hidden from the public eye, and with little contact

1 Within the framework of historical victimology, victims are defined as civilians who did not actively participate in the conflict, while martyrs are active participants in the conflict who are also culpable. This is the most general distinction that is the basis for more detailed classifications (Graovac, 2002), quoted as per Stojčić, M. „Kultura sećanja i strategije reprezentacije prošlosti u Srbiji“, 2021

with the places where essential political decisions are made. It is important to make distinctions between them, and primarily to understand what their desired vision of the future is, because “how we remember and what we remember expresses our priority political values quite reliably” (Kuljić 2006), as well as our projections of the future.

Newly created orders of memory, organized exclusively on ethnocentric and self-victimizing patterns based on the “executioner-victim” distinction, can be observed in every county of the post-Yugoslav space. These orders of memory are reflected in the calendars of these countries, memorial culture, mainstream cultural production, symbolic acts committed by diverse newly created communities of memory (those that do not essentially oppose the hegemonic politics of memory). In this official order of memory, there is no room for ambiguity, ambivalence, or nuance of roles and positions, nor for the suffering and losses of *the other*, always marked and understood exclusively as the *ethnic* other.

Thus organized official public memory was made possible by ubiquitous historical revisionism, which gained momentum in these areas as early as the 1980s. Socialist anti-fascism was one of the first victims of the revisionist wave in the historiography and wider cultural life of our region, as was the experience of living together in our former state. During this wave, the memory politics in the region were strongly shaped by two forces - homogenizing and exclusive national narratives, which recall the period of socialist Yugoslavia as a “dungeon of the people”, and the supposedly ideology-free narrative regarding democracies that have yet to be built, the construction of which also means a final break with the dark, totalitarian past<sup>2</sup>. Each in their own way, both of these forces empty and “liberate” anti-fascism

from its historical continuity, political content and inextricable connection with left-wing political movements.

Revisionist interventions in historiography resulted not only in the strengthening of ethno-politics and self-victimization narratives within each national collective, but also the impossibility of envisioning a truly progressive future that could be (as the past once was) supranational. Thus, revisionism not only curtailed wider support for dealing with ethnically motivated violence from the past, but also extremely depoliticized and narrowed the horizon of expectations, and made any questioning of the past based on other principles appear like an infantile and immature act by a group of completely irrelevant and immature actors. Thus, the reality created in the name of the nation and its preeminence and sanctity engendered a series of processes that meant the economic and political murder of a *society*, a process that continues to this day, with no end in sight.

In all three countries of the so-called Dayton Triangle, the same political forces that either started the wars or wholeheartedly ideologically and economically prepared them are largely still in power. In many ways, the process of facing the past at the state level has come full circle. Certain positive steps have certainly been made<sup>3</sup>, but what dominates this process is the petrification of collective identities based on self-victimization and the use and revision of history for the purpose of homogenization and cementing ethnic divisions. The sporadic progress made at the state level, and especially at the upper echelons of the state, failed to resonate at the level of societies. Thus they mostly remained as symbolic acts that did not lead to a real change in the way local communities perceive crimes and/or the persons who ordered or executed them.

2 This was supported by some official documents adopted at the EU level. In 1996, the Council of Europe passed a resolution entitled “On measures to dismantle the legacy of former communist totalitarian regimes”, followed in 2006 by another resolution of the same body, the “Need for international condemnation of crimes of totalitarian communist regimes”. “The resolution calls on the governments of the former communist countries from Eastern and Central Europe to make a clear and definitive departure from their communist past, to strongly condemn the human rights violations of the inhumane communist government, to review (i.e. rewrite) their own history and the history of communism itself, all with the aim of international and domestic reconciliation and the adoption of a new value system based on human rights”. According to: Vojislav Martinov “Psovka za prošlost”, in: *Stigma totalitarizma*, AKO, Novi Sad, 2014.

3 Indictments were brought before the International Tribunal in The Hague against 161 persons, including those most responsible for planning and carrying out mass crimes; a large archive was created on crimes and their political, ideological and logistical preparation, there is a fairly accurate list of the dead and missing in all countries of the region; In 2003, we witnessed the mutual apology of the President of the then State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, Svetozar Marović, and the President of Croatia, Stjepan Mesić, “for all the evils that the citizens of the two countries committed upon one another in the past”; In 2010, the Assembly of the Republic of Serbia adopted a Declaration on the condemnation of the crime committed in Srebrenica, which was preceded by apologies from the President of Serbia at the time, Boris Tadić, in 2004 and 2007 for the crimes committed in BiH and Croatia.



Only when the socio-economic dimension of wars is taken into account does it become clear that the suffering of others is not the sole issue permanently and unquestionably excluded from the current memory politics. Another blind spot is extremely important for understanding both the outcome of these processes, as well as for deeper insight into the failures of the models that have so far been implemented to bear with, contain, overcome or face the past. This blind spot is the almost complete failure to deal with the consequences (physical, material, psychological) of the socio-economic transformation that ran parallel to the wars for territories, resources and power. For decades, this issue has been in full focus for the international community, national political structures, as well as significant portions of the academic community and civil society, which were the most vocal in demanding that other types of war crimes be dealt with. The crimes committed during the transformation of social property first into state and then private property, the total devastation of public goods and the destruction of social capital created during fifty years of living in socialism, the loss of jobs and basic existential security for millions of workers, the collapse of every form of equality and remnants of social justice are part of a story never told to completion, one that has left behind desolation, permanently changed our societies (or what remained of them) and left a difficult legacy, the most disastrous consequence of which is the impossibility of any kind of solidarity beyond that projected along a map created by national groups during the war.

And while it is easier to understand why the ruling elites, both the nationalist ones who planned and led the wars, and the “democratic” ones who succeeded them for a while, were not inclined to address this issue, it is a bit more challenging to understand the complacency of a part of the public which (justifiably) held the view that an honest reflection on one’s own past violence is necessary for any future emancipatory and progressive politics. For the large segment of civil society that insisted on facing the past, this never became an important topic. Raising this issue was often labeled as moral relativism, the avoidance of really difficult and important topics, an attempt to avoid the complete and unconditional acceptance of one’s own group’s guilt for the crimes

committed. Problematizing this aspect of our violent past was expectedly not in the interest of various international actors who, at the moment when the Yugoslav space was going through one of the most painful and darkest periods of its history, were celebrating the end of the era of bipolar division of power in the world, the end of socialism and the permanent victory of the Western values of freedom and democracy, declaring the famous “end of history”<sup>4</sup>.

It was a considerable challenge to explain to the war-weary, tortured and impoverished citizens of the former Yugoslavia that the worst decade of their lives was just a prelude to the final transition to democracy, freedom and well-being. While segments of our societies have accepted that the biggest obstacles on that path are the crimes committed in the immediate past and the problem of impunity, for a large group of people, regardless of their nationality, it remains unclear why the question of theft, extortion, the enrichment of a small circle of political elites, and the impoverishment of the broadest stratum of the people has never been dealt with as part of this project of “facing the past”.

## why still face the past? why more confrontation?

The answer to the question of why it is important to include dealing with the consequences of socio-economic transformation in the discourse of facing the past, and why it is important to restore the element of social justice to the question of achieving justice is also the answer to the question of why dealing with it is (still) important and necessary for all our societies.

No progressive and emancipatory politics will be possible in the future exclusively within state or national borders. Cooperation and joint action are increasingly necessary in defense of rights that have already been secured, but by no means taken for granted, in defense of the remaining public goods, in the fight for the right to clean air and water, for a dignified

<sup>4</sup> Francis Fukuyama’s phrase “the end of history” has been used to herald the supposed final supremacy of liberal democracy as the universal and ultimate value and form of government. Accordingly, the previous system was inevitably labeled as totalitarian, and thus devoid of any positive achievements that should not only be remembered, but that are worth defending and advocating for again.

salary, and for social justice that does not exclude the most vulnerable. The common struggle that is ahead of us must certainly include an open and truthful attitude towards the crimes of the past, the naming and recognition of the injustices committed, and an honest attempt to correct them. However, we must believe that such a confrontation is necessary, not because it is imposed from the outside as a precondition for some future reward (always tantalizingly out of reach), but because it will allow us to think politically more clearly and act jointly in a more organized way within a space that was and remains “ours”, no matter what different names some might call it.

We need this confrontation, not in order to continue competing on who the bigger victim is, and who has suffered more, nor in order to keep the coming generations hostage to old, festering wounds from the past, but precisely in order to transcend these processes, and be able to argue,

disagree, but also sympathize and cooperate with each other on grounds other than national and international. It is clear that such a confrontation requires clear political and value positions, a lot of intellectual and practical political work on the ground, and a reclamation of the right to utopia, the right to think politically about that which we have been convinced is “impossible”, “insane” or “passé” for decades. That is why the goal is not confrontation *per se*, but the realization of a progressive left politics, of which a critical attitude towards the past would be an integral part. To keep progressive left politics active and alive, they would need to be critical of the practices and models of facing the past that have been implemented thus far - not to completely reject their results and legacy, but to really learn from their mistakes and omissions, and to finally help loosen the steely grip of crime and violence. ■■■

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# the past is still someone's present

Vildana Selimbegović

It was the end of the summer of 1999. My colleague Željko Kopanja, the founder and owner of *Nezavisne novine* from Banja Luka, called me on the phone with one request: he wanted to publish my articles about Kazani as a prelude to his series about the infamous “Miće”. We easily agreed, but after only a few of his texts about the crimes committed by “Miće” in the name of the Serbian people, a bomb was planted under Kopanja’s car, which he barely survived, but remained permanently disabled, having lost both legs. He died in the summer of 2016, without the assassins having been discovered or punished. Sometime at the beginning of this century, we stayed together in Ljubljana and looked in disbelief at the front pages of Slovenian newspapers where the debate about civil partnerships was being conducted, as the law there would allow same-sex couples to register. How we envied them! In our Bosnia and Herzegovina, the topic of all topics has been (and remains) wars, hatred and accusations of crimes committed against members of one’s own people – and not those committed on their behalf.

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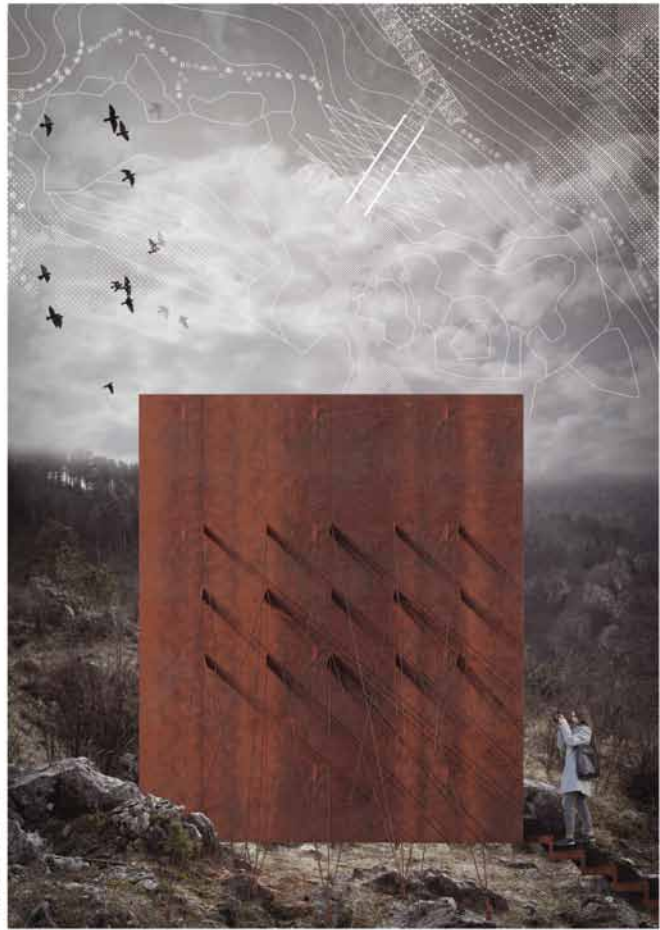
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IDEJNO RJEŠENJE SPOMEN OBILJEŽJA  
 LOKALITET KAZANI  
 SARAJEVO, BIH  
 2021  
 Kenan Vatrenjak

Na Kazanima, u samo par koraka izmjenjuju se dva potpuno različita ambijenta. Sa ruba jame pruža se širokokutni pogled na grad, provocirajući misli o njegovoj historiji, zajedničkim sjećanjima...Ako se siđe samo par koraka u jamu, na istočnoj sigurnijoj strani otkriva se jedan introvertiran, izdvojeni prostor, koji provocira intimni doživljaj mjesta. Baš ovi oblici stijena, baš ovakve sjene i ovi borovi bili su možda zadnji utisci ubijenih na ovom mjestu.

Doživjeti ovo mjesto na budan i intiman način otvara nas da se bar na trenutak poistovjetimo sa žrtvama. Da za trenutak njihovim očima pogledamo oko sebe. To poistovjećenje i takav doživljaj je spomenik kojem se teži ovim projektom, a projektovano rješenje je sresstvo u tom nastojanju. Spomenik je doživljaj praznine ovog ambisa, a da nigdje ne dotira kroz ljesnac između dva zahrdala, korten zida, na kojima prolazak vremena tako jasno ostavlja tragove. To je prolaz namijenjen za samo jednu osobu, širine tek 90 cm, jer na koncu, suočavanje je vrlo lični doživljaj. Ulazim u ovaj uzani prolaz i spuštam se prema ambisu, gazeći providna rešetkaste stepenice; visoki židovi mi odstranjuju sve utiske osim onog što je ispred mene. Odsječak stijena, mahovina i tragovi voda.

Ovaj silazak ne vodi nigdje, na kraju nema podesta za ugodno zadržavanje. Na kraju je jedino dolazak pred prostor ambisa. Na unutrašnjoj strani korten zida je spomen ploča sa imenima ubijenih, a ispod nje niša. Tu neko ostavi cvijeće, neko zapali svijeću...



Author of the conceptual design:  
 Kenan Vatrenjak,  
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The “Miće” unit, which Kopanja wrote about, was the subject of Hague investigations, later handed over to the BiH Prosecutor’s Office. During the war, they roamed the territory of the municipalities of Teslić and Doboј, killing Bosniak and Croat civilians, and those who were lucky enough to survive were abused, robbed and banished. The leaders of the unit were indicted while Kopanja was still alive, but not convicted. Believe it or not, that process is still ongoing. The story of Kazani, on the other hand, is relatively complete. Kazani is a pit, actually a cut on the Trebević mountain, into which members of the 10th Mountain Brigade

of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina dumped the corpses of murdered non-Bosniaks, mostly Serbs. In the middle of the war in 1993, the BiH Presidency ordered an action euphemistically called a crackdown on crime in its own ranks. The action was carried out on October 26 of the same year, and the commander of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Brigade, Mušan Topalović Caco - refusing to surrender - took hostages, civilians from a nearby building, and, using them as human shields, killed nine members of the special military and police units who came for him. When he was finally arrested, he was killed while trying to escape, and his body was buried in an unmarked grave, not far

from the place where the remains of the victims found in Kazani were also buried - also in bags without markings. Caco's comrades, the perpetrators of the crime, were convicted of brutal murders before the military court in Sarajevo during the war, and all of them, without exception, claimed that they acted on the orders of their commander when they took defenseless civilians out of their homes and killed them near Kazani. However, already in the late fall of 1996, Caco's unmarked grave was replaced with a spot in the Kovači Memorial Cemetery in Sarajevo, into which he was accompanied by an unprecedented funeral procession with more than 10,000 people.

His victims are still awaiting identification. In those years, I often wrote about them and the efforts of their families to at least give them a dignified burial. The investigation was terminated and never resumed. Even today, we don't actually know whose deaths Topalović ordered. The remains of at least 23 victims were exhumed from Kazani, although information about 32 victims has unofficially reached journalists. Their memory was preserved by families and non-governmental organizations, above all by the Association for Social Research and Communications (UDIK), which used to organize a history lesson on October 26 every year, reminding the people of Sarajevo of the crime committed against our neighbors in our name. At one point it seemed that we would cross the rubicon, as the vice-president of the Federation, Svetozar Pudarić, himself disabled as a result of the war, went to Kazani every October 26 since his appointment in 2011 to lay flowers. He advocated for a monument to the victims, which the city authorities of Sarajevo accepted and even announced

a competition (with his financial support) for an architectural solution. Then the mayor Benjamina Karić, a young doctor of historical science and vice-president of the local leading civic party SDP, entered the scene, first canceled the competition, and then imposed her own architectural vision in the form of a memorial plaque, without a clear path to get there. Most tragically, the final list memorialized only 17 victims and its text protects the person who ordered their deaths. Whoever manages to make it to the commemorative plaque will not find out why we remember our fellow citizens. That is not all: the wise mayor found a way to further suppress from the collective memory Caco's responsibility for ordering crimes. Instead of October 26, the day when his crimes were brought to light, the memorial day for the victims was this year moved to November 9.

This is how the story about Kazani concludes as an ode to the criminal and the minimization of the victims. It is almost understandable that in the cacophony of jokes from social networks, the initiative of UDIK to build a memorial or plaque for the victims (for the sake of Sarajevo's conscience and coexistence during the 1405 days of the siege) in the city or at the end of the cemetery of St. Josip, where they were buried in a secondary tomb with unidentified markings, is completely lost. However, while the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its city government fervently avoided placing the name of the criminal on the memorial plaque in Kazani, they did not hesitate to hang a sign on the building where they are meeting, the Sarajevo Town Hall, which reads: "On this spot, Serbian criminals set fire to the national and university library of BiH on the



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night of August 25-26, 1992. More than two million books, magazines and documents disappeared in the flames. Do not forget, remember and remind.” So we know who burned books, but we refuse to know who murdered people. For nothing is easier than judging others, while celebrating your criminals as heroes.

This is the rule that Bosnian and Herzegovinian society, parceled out and divided, accepts as an axiom on which it perseveres. A street in the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina once named in honor of Srđan Aleksić, a young man who was killed because he stood up to protect the life of his neighbor, a Bosniak, in Trebinje, has recently been renamed. He never even had a street named after him in Trebinje. In Vareš, the obelisk in front of the Municipality building with the message “Bow in your own way” bothered the authorities because it contained neither religious nor national symbols. On the other hand, it is almost normal that murals celebrating the commander responsible for the gravest crimes committed in the wars of the ‘90s, VRS General Ratko Mladić, are popping up throughout the Republic of Srpska. The rewriting of history on the wings of

domestic radicalism is becoming more and more pronounced each and every year, and revisionism is reaching into the distant past. In such an atmosphere, looking into the mirror of history becomes pointless. *Oslobođenje* columnist Dragan Markovina recently illustrated the local practice precisely. He wrote about the signing of a contract to bring children who are educated in Bosnia and Herzegovina according to the Croatian curriculum to classes in Vukovar, the Croatian hero city, which units of the JNA and Serbian paramilitary formations razed to the ground, committing egregious crimes against Croats. Dragan points to the paradox and states: “The amount of empathy of the people of Mostar towards those people and that city is incredible, which is best seen by lighting candles in Vukovarska Street every year on this date (the anniversary of the fall of Vukovar; a/n), which is proportional to the complete lack of empathy for the fact that their own city of Mostar was turned into Hiroshima and that in 1993 and 1994 it looked like Vukovar. But there are no candles on Bulevar and Šantićeva Street”. There are none because Mostar was made into another Vukovar by units of the HVO and the Croatian Army.

That is why he urges that children no longer be taken to the places of our own suffering and start being shown the places of the suffering of others. In the devastated Bosnian nationalist societies, this would mean that Croat children should be taken to the Old Bridge, Ahmići and Stolac, Bosniak children to Bugojno and Kazani, and Serbian children to Srebrenica, Vukovar, Sarajevo and Dubrovnik. Elementary school students, as he says, must be spared the horrors of war and national victimological identities, and at least allowed to have a normal childhood. This should be limited to high school students, who are able to understand the reason for visiting these places. It seems to me that this is a reasonable recipe to start building a society that will show empathy towards others and towards difference, and form the nucleus of understanding our past. One should give up on the current generations. Due to the current school programs and the ever growing radicalism of the rulers of our Bosniak, Serbian and Croatian nationalisms, the three post-war decades were lost in devotion to divisions. Civil society lost the battle of facing the past long ago, and those rare voices of reason in non-governmental associations and the media are not heard loudly enough. If we want to defend civilizational values, with respect for all victims being at the top of the priority list, we have no choice but to copy the formula of the nationalists. After Dayton, they carried out the most aggressive campaign against education. It is high time that this lesson is put into practice and reverence for the victims is incorporated into the highschool curriculum. Understanding this history is a precondition for them to build a society that will not only face the past, but build a future of understanding and respect for diversity. ■■

# why the facts matter

Bekim Blakaj

Throughout history, too many conflicts have been fueled by biased narratives about the past. When there are no documented facts about a violent event from the past, then it can easily become the subject of manipulative interpretations for the purposes of rewriting history in order to achieve political objectives, as unfortunately often happens. It is likely that the wars which followed the dissolution of former Yugoslavia were also enhanced by one-sided narratives about crimes committed by various nationalists during World War II. One example which demonstrates disputes because of a lack of documented historical facts is the concentration camp in Jasenovac. The alleged number of victims varies from 70.000 up to almost a million, depending on the ethnic point of view, Croat or Serb. The creation of one sided and nation-based narratives cannot guarantee a long-lasting peace.

Collecting the facts about crimes and victims of the war is of paramount importance due to its multilayered effects. First of all, facts have a direct effect in the victims' communities. They will not remain uncounted, unrecognized, and neglected. Their dignity can begin to be restored once crimes against them are documented. Collection of the facts raises the possibility of having more perpetrators prosecuted. Thus, the space for impunity is reduced and the right to justice is fulfilled for more victims. Chances that victims and their families receive compensation/reparation, be it material or symbolic, increase once the facts about the crimes committed against them are collected and documented. After the facts about crimes and the victims have been collected, analyzed and published,

public empathy toward victims is created, reducing the distance between communities which were on opposing sides during the conflict. If the process of documenting the facts about violations of human rights, war crimes and crimes against humanity during the conflict is followed by proper measures, such as the implementation of the transitional justice mechanism including truth commissions, then the conditions for guaranteeing non-recurrence of the conflict in the future are very strong. This entire process, which depends on fact finding, can eventually create an environment for reconciliation.

Unfortunately, authorities of the ex-Yugoslav countries did not collect the facts about the crimes committed during the wars that took place during the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, at least not in an impartial and comprehensive way. Even if they have collected facts, this was done only partially - by making sure not to document crimes committed by the security agencies or armed groups of their respective state. The few publications issued by state institutions contain inaccurate information which isn't based primarily in fact.

The International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) has done a good job in documenting crimes by gathering facts and evidence concerning the war crimes with the aim of prosecuting those most responsible for the crimes. Collected facts and evidence were administered in front of the court and after the conclusion of the trials they remained in the archives and database of ICTY. However, the media did not have a constructive approach in dealing with the facts and evidence that were presented before the court. They have



failed to inform the wide public about these facts, because they were very selective in presenting it in the countries of origin of the accused. One of the rarest exceptions is the agency SENSE, which has done a fantastic job in collecting, processing and presenting the facts presented before the ICTY to the general public both in Serbia and also in other countries of former Yugoslavia.

The lack of commitment by authorities to systematically document casualties and violations of human rights during the conflict led some NGOs to take on this burden in order to establish facts about the past and by doing so, to prevent denial and revisionism. There were different initiatives in almost all countries of the region. However, the most serious initiatives to document casualties are the *Bosnian Book of the Dead* and the *Kosovo Memory Book*.

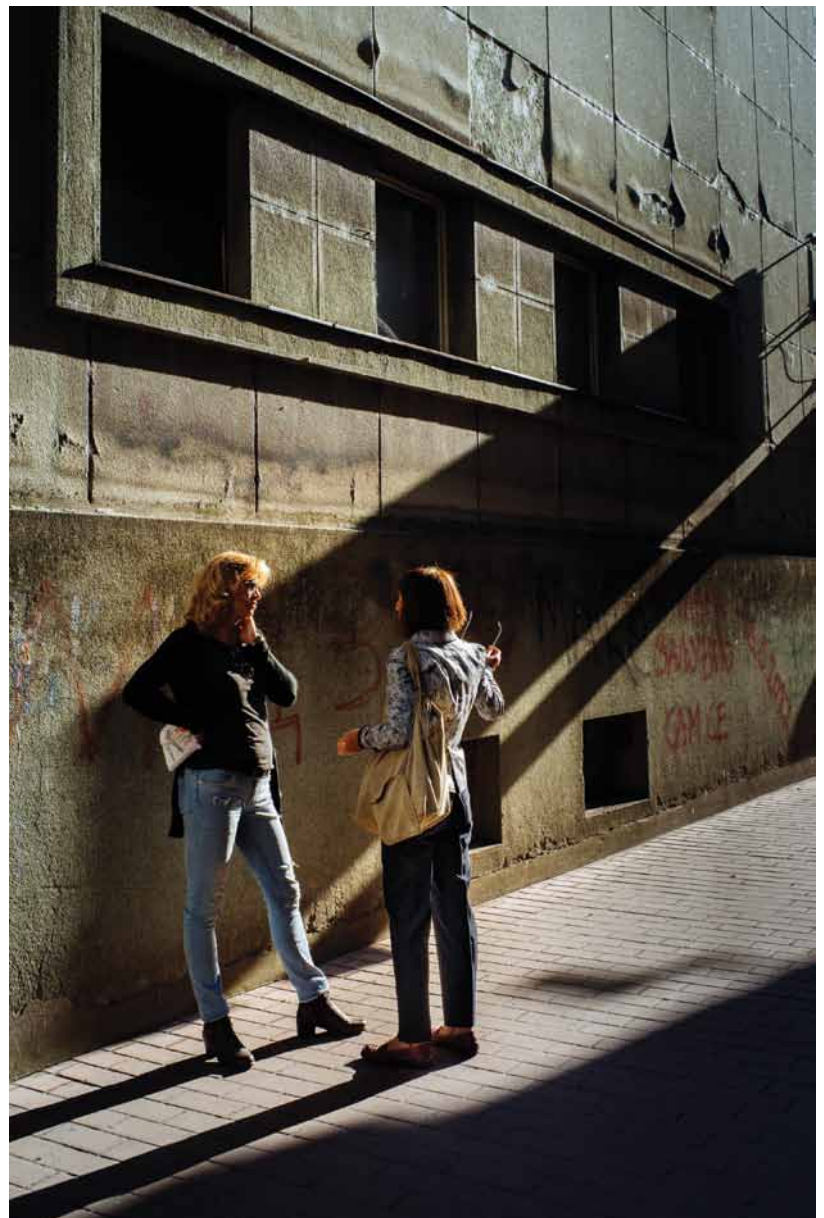
Research Documentation Center (RDC), an NGO based in Sarajevo, has undertaken a very important initiative in order to register all of the victims, with their names and surnames, who lost their lives or went missing during the war in Bosnia and Hercegovina. In 2013, with the support of the Humanitarian Law Center in Serbia, RDC was able to publish *Bosnian Book of the Dead*, a book that contains around 96.000 names of people killed and missing as a consequence of the war in Bosnia and Hercegovina. Although this publication has been criticized for alleged minimization of numbers of victims, there is no evidence that the record of *Bosnian Book of the Dead* is inaccurate. Actually, these critiques demonstrate that if this work hadn't been done, the chances of establishing inaccurate narratives would only increase.

*Kosovo Memory Book* (KMB), a capital project, is implemented by the Humanitarian Law Center (HLC), based in Serbia, and the Humanitarian Law Center Kosovo (HLCK). The project aims to document the human cost of the war in Kosovo, all those who were killed or went missing in the period from January 1, 1998 to December 31, 2000. These two organizations started documenting casualties during the war, when researchers of HLC conducted interviews with families of killed persons and other witnesses. So far, more than 18.000 interviews have been conducted by researchers of HLC and HLCK, but these testimonies are not the only source of information for documenting casualties. There are other sources of information both primary and secondary, such as court

documents which mainly come from the ICTY, but also documentation from other institutions, international and domestic NGOs, media items, various publications and so on. One of the reasons why this project is successful in registering all war-related victims is the fact that it is implemented by two organizations which are based in different countries. Therefore they were able to reach nearly all victims' families.

All documents gathered and created within the KMB project are analyzed and logged in a database with advanced software which has been developed specifically for this project. The documents are linked to each other in such a way as to enable

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analysts to create a file for each victim and event with casualties. The database contains files for 13,549 people who were killed or went missing as a result of the Kosovo war. The database was evaluated by the Human Rights Data Analysis Group and their findings were encouraging. In the report, the authors stated that it is the most advanced database of this nature that they have evaluated. They concluded the report by saying, "We congratulate the HLC and HLC-Kosovo on an extraordinary and remarkable project. Few conflicts have received the sustained and professional attention that the HLC and HLC-Kosovo have given to the human losses in Kosovo 1998–2000. The world benefits from this knowledge. Above all, we acknowledge the victims who will now always be remembered."

There are numerous practical functions for the documentation collected within the KMB project. Beyond the publication of Kosovo Memory Book, HLC has used the database of the KMB to draft the criminal reports against perpetrators. Some of these

criminal reports ended up being used in the prosecution of the perpetrators who were later found guilty of their crimes before the courts. Also, the database was used to draft dossiers about the role of particular military brigades and units as well as their commanders. The database also serves the purpose of memorialization, such as the exhibition in honor of killed and missing children - "Once Upon a Time and Never Again," that was prepared and installed by HLCK.

In conclusion, documentation of facts and evidence about the violations of human rights, war crimes and crimes against humanity is the most important action in order to come to terms with the past, and serves as a solid base for future reconciliation. Without establishing the facts that produce truthful narratives about the past, accompanied by recognition and acknowledgement of all victims, a sustainable and long-lasting peace in the region will not be possible. ■■

# Serbia: nationalism without alternative and politics of memory without self-reflection

Milivoj Bešlin

Since the beginning of Putin's February 2022 attack on sovereign Ukraine, contrary to the expectations of European institutions, Serbia has clearly aligned itself in support of this act of aggression. The authoritarian regime of President Aleksandar Vučić and his opposition nationalist rivals, the majority of the non-governmental sector, as well as the regime and opposition media and the majority of the intellectual and academic elite, agree with this alignment. In order not to provoke Western donors, most of the non-governmental sector, which is moderately pro-Russian and nationalist-oriented, has wrapped its pseudo-anti-war position in hypocritical pacifist cloth with the basic message that the problem is the aid Ukraine receives. According to the principle of legality, if there is no Ukraine, there is no problem and no war. However, the majority of the Serbian non-governmental sector has forgotten the key thing: if Russia ends its aggression - the war ends; but if Ukraine stops defending itself, it ceases to exist.

Serbian public opinion is much more radical. Over 80% of Serbian citizens believe that Russia is not responsible for the war in Ukraine and do not accept the news about the crimes committed against Ukrainian civilians, while as many as 84% of Serbian citizens oppose the sanctions against the Russian aggressor. For months after the start of the invasion, the RTS public broadcaster used the term "special operation", which is characteristic of Russian-controlled media. Private television stations loyal to President Vučić continuously broadcast pro-Russian propaganda. That is why the news that Putin's propaganda service *Russia Today* is opening a representative office in Serbia did not cause much of a stir, as almost all

media in Serbia toe the line of Russian propaganda. The only difference is that the opposition media promote pro-Russian narratives in a more sophisticated way than those controlled by Vučić.

We know that Ukraine is an Orthodox country, that it did not recognize Kosovo's independence and that Serbia has had no historical misunderstandings with Ukraine. Yet the question remains - why is there such massive support for Russian aggression in Serbia? According to research, there is no society in Europe, including Belarus, where there is such mass enthusiasm for the Russian invasion.

Above all, it is the model of aggression and its justification which the majority of Serbia recognizes as a repetition of its aggressive wars against Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. In short: in the destroyed Mariupol, nationalist Serbia recognizes its complete destruction of Vukovar (November 1991), while in the mass graves around Bucha, the Serbian public opinion recognizes the historical "correctness" of the genocide and mass graves throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995).

Since the restoration of a multi-party system in Serbia in 1990, the political system produced a surplus of parties, almost all of which reproduced a single idea - the Greater Serbia concept of Serbian nationalism which has since been in place, without alternative, for three full decades. At the end of the Cold War, Serbia did not get political plurality along with its multi-party system. Obviously, the problem is profound and is to be found in society. The political order reflected the poverty of ideas and ideological homogeneity.

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At the dawn of the war which Slobodan Milošević would launch against Yugoslavia, under the false pretext of its preservation, the political alternative was sidelined. The anti-war movement was pushed into the political underground, persecuted and limited to a few marginal organizations in Belgrade and multinational Vojvodina. All the relevant opposition parties supported the idea of Greater Serbia and Milošević's war goals in different ways. At different stages of the war, two key opposition parties (SPO and DS) either had their own or supported other (para)military formations, while the pseudo-opposition Radical Party committed crimes for which its leader (Vojislav Šešelj) was duly convicted before the International Tribunal in The Hague.

When it took power after October 5, 2000, the opposition, which was an accomplice to Milošević during the 1990s, could not sufficiently distance itself from the policies it participated in. This is one of the fundamental failures of the October 5th Republic, the failure to introduce a new political system and break with the old ideological matrices inherited from the time of Milošević. After more than 30 years, despite the nominal change of government, Serbia has never gone through a substantial change in politics. This is crucial to understanding the failure to face the war crimes of the 1990s and the failure of transitional justice and the mechanisms that were designed to break with the values and practices of the 1990s.

However, the first attempts to deal with the crimes of the war policy were recorded during the government of Zoran Đinđić, when, in the summer of 2001, he extradited Slobodan Milošević to the Hague. The national broadcaster showed a shocking film about the genocide in Srebrenica, the Assembly strongly protested, and the party of another key political leader, Vojislav Koštunica, fiercely opposed the timid attempts of Đinđić and his government to criticize Milošević's war policy.

At that time, intellectuals from the alternative anti-war spectrum argued fiercely on the pages of the weekly *Vreme* (2002) whether Đinđić should be supported unconditionally or only if he set in motion clear mechanisms to deal with crimes from recent wars. These attempts would end with the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić (March 12, 2003) and his swift replacement with conservative nationalist Vojislav Koštunica.

Koštunica's government stopped most of the attempts to deal with the legacy of the war, but it also did something much worse: it launched a policy of reaffirming and reviving the ideological foundations of Serbian nationalism and the Greater Serbia project that was the basis for Serbia's aggression towards its neighbors in the 1990s.

The last stage of the October 5th Republic was marked by the government of the Democratic Party of Boris Tadić (2008-2012), which secured the famous "historical reconciliation" with Milošević's SPS party, which was steeped in crime and corruption during the 1990s. This fact already limited the possibilities of the Tadić government to break with the memory politics that led to the gradual rehabilitation of war narratives and nationalist ideology. However, that government did not directly and openly rehabilitate war policies, it even extradited two leaders of the Serbian war effort in Bosnia and Herzegovina - Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, accused of serious crimes such as genocide - to the International Court of Justice in The Hague. However, the government of the Democratic Party made intense rehabilitation efforts on behalf of the Serbian collaborationist and ultra-nationalist movement from the Second World War (Draža Mihailović's Chetniks). The rehabilitation of crime and criminal politics from the 1940s was the platform for the rehabilitation of politics and crime from the 1990s, but this was not accomplished by the government of the Democratic Party, but by the one that succeeded it, which consisted of the leaders of Šešelj's Radical Party.

Although it came to power with a nominally pro-European policy and a reformist narrative, emphasizing that they had learned the lessons of history and put an end to their old neo-fascist politics, the leaders of the Serbian Progressive Party came up with a new memory politics soon after coming to power in 2012. The 1990s were gradually rehabilitated, the democratic coup of October 5, 2000 was demonized. The turning point in the memory politics was 2015, when Great Britain proposed a resolution in the UN Security Council on the 20th anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica.

The media hysteria that Vučić's regime produced at the time, as well as the presentation of him as a victim during his visit to Srebrenica (due to mass outrage over his visit to Potočari in 2015) opened up space for a radical reinterpretation of memory politics. This marked the beginning of a total reaffirmation of the war policy of the 1990s, by omitting or denying all crimes committed by the Serbs and presenting them as the exclusive victims of the recent wars.

Thus, memory politics was transformed from revisionism and rehabilitation of crimes into open revanchism. The narrative of Serbia as a victim and the denial of any criminal character of the Serbian wars of conquest from the 1990s are now a function of new territorial claims towards neighbors and the treatment of surrounding countries and existing borders as temporary and provisional. In the words of Vučić's pro-Russian ally Ivica Dacić, "Serbs are not satisfied with the existing balance of power in the Balkans, which is why the wars are not over, and the second half is coming."

Vučić's publicly promoted "Serbian world" is an old Greater Serbia idea with the aim of rejecting existing borders in the region and imposing new ones by force. Vučić's revanchist memory politics, strongly supported by Putin's media and intelligence structures, is a function of mental and ideological preparations for new conflicts in the Western Balkans that will be caused by attempts of the Serbian regime to change the existing internationally recognized borders.

The increasingly certain and historically inevitable collapse of Putin's "Russian world" will also stop the Kremlin's main allies in the Balkans and will create space for essential paradigm changes in Serbia, which must begin with the creation of a new, self-reflective order of memory. ■■■

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# Bosnia and Herzegovina: three decades of facing the past

Lejla Gačanica

I recently spoke at a regional conference on memory politics, and when asked what can be learned from the Bosnian example of facing the past, I answered “what not to do”. With 27 years of distance from what we call ‘the end of the war’ in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), which was actually the end of only one segment of the war - the armed conflict – it is clear that there is very little constructive cooperation. Here we should not limit ourselves only to the war of the 1990s, but include the collapse of Yugoslavia and the collective memory that had been nurtured until that time. In that identity and ideological gap, three parallel politics of memory developed, originating in ethnicity and what it became in the 1990s - the supreme, defining characteristic of the groups that were at war.

War is not only present in everyday life today – war, which never truly ended, is a point to which we return again and again. Memory politics have exaggerated the war and suffering (exclusively) of one’s own ethnic group to such an extent that it becomes difficult to fight for any other value in the face of the ultimate argument - war, and consequently (ethnic) suffering and heroism.

Selective memories, especially collective ones, are important for all groups. Therefore, collective memory is shaped in such a way as to support a particular view of the past and is not necessarily true or complete. The selection of what enters the collective memory speaks volumes about a society and the values it wants to uphold after a traumatic, violent event. What characterizes the collective memories of BiH are parallel ethnic narratives, whose only common point is the absence of a

critical culture of memory. This does not mean that alternative narratives have not been developed and maintained, but their weakness lies precisely in this alternativeness. Here, in contrast to the official memory politics, memory which the official policies try to silence, erase, and suppress is ‘preserved’. It is this persistence of alternative memories that serves as a glimmer of hope that unwanted parts of the past will not be completely erased - at least not so easily.

From the point of view of official policies, the past is misused in BiH, trapped in ethnicity and not open for discussion. Since 1995, little has been done to get an honest overview of the past and the mechanisms of transitional justice, and so much has been done to build ethnic identities where exclusive, one-sided narratives about the past have been successfully incorporated. With the absence of a systemic, institutional response to the legacy of these conflicting conceptions of the past and the constant political and social struggle for memory, space is left open to continue pursuing rhetoric and policies inclined toward maintaining the status quo, i.e., fueling anxieties and divisions.

The key characteristics of official collective memories and the consequence of these approaches to memory are opposition and exclusivity, but also coexistence. The process of establishing the narratives we have now has gone through various forms, and has produced mutual intolerance and little appetite for reconciliation. Conflicting narratives about the past such as these result in divided societies prone to the abuse of memory, thus creating the potential for new conflicts.

Bosniak, Croatian and Serbian narratives about the past developed simultaneously but with each closed off in its own narration. There is no question about the 1990s that would yield the same answer between these three parties. Questions like: who started the war; who are the victims; who are the heroes; who is the winner; what happened – will result in widely different answers. Within each politics of memory, only the members of one particular ethnic group are victims and/or heroes, and the ‘other’ are criminals. Not only is this kind of memory politics operational in BiH, but the narratives each feed off the others. As long as there are ‘threats’ towards any of the ethnic sides, the other sides have reason and need to promote their own narratives based on the same foundations - ‘protection’ narratives. This policy of division works well in a state drawn along entity and ethnic lines, where there is permanent fear and potential for new conflicts.

Official memories in BiH have been successfully institutionalized through education, media, and memorialization. Add to that the generations born after the war, who grew up inundated with these ethnic narratives and a lack of openness towards the ‘other’, yet at the same time living next door to the Other. The result of such roles and divisions imposed upon young people today results in two extremes: ultra nationalism or saturation and refusal to discuss the past at all.

It is important to point out here that different minorities remain outside the official collective memories, such as

women, Roma, various other national minorities, and children born because of the war. Essentially, there is no place for anyone or anything that is not on a direct ethnic, moral and/or value (often religiously based) line. Thus, official memory politics leave out entire segments of the past, sidelining them without collective recognition and acceptance. This is another one of the disadvantages of collective (ethnic) memory . Each of the groups have built their memory separate from the official memory while at the same time struggling with the reparations process, which is administratively and politically inaccessible and discriminatory. In terms of the scope of memory politics, these are examples of where the inability and unwillingness to respond to the post-conflict needs of the community is glaringly evident, let alone the inability and unwillingness to establish mechanisms of transitional justice that are equal for all.

Culture and art, as well as civil society, remain places of freedom, i.e., spaces where memory politics are questioned and the erasure of facts and parts of the past are loudly opposed. Nevertheless, there are limitations in their competitiveness with official narratives, largely because they neither reach nor are understood by the wider social community, so they fail to become part of the official memory. It seems that this ‘battle’ of memories - or battle *for* memories - will continue in the future. It is simply impossible to penetrate the official Bosniak, Croatian and Serbian collective memories and encourage a critical view of



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the past, especially regarding the crimes of one's own group and the suffering of other groups, which would be the first step towards building trust and peace. Thus, the coexistence of opposing ethnic narratives is seen as natural and inevitable, while ethnically uncolored, alternative narratives about the past are contested and considered hostile by all three memory politics. In this constant struggle between the petrified ethnic memory and contested civic memory, parts of the past that have been slated to be erased from the official memory are being illuminated.

The second segment of alternative memory in BiH are individual, personal memories. Where they do not correspond with the collective, these memories are either suppressed or lost, together with those who lived through them, or else they are maintained at the family level and passed on generationally. Oral histories are used to save these segments of the past, in order to give the events a human face, and to give the victims the right to their own trauma and memory.

Is there life (together) after the war? Yes. But the question is whether there is peace in that life or whether we are just living it as a period between two wars, hoping that one war was more than enough. In that life, post-Yugoslav identities were built or revived, new social and political systems were established, memory politics were constructed, mental and material spaces were occupied, and these processes are still ongoing. That is the eternal hope of all those who work tirelessly to build a responsible

memory culture, as opposed to regressive policies of separation and maintenance of the frozen conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Numerous opportunities have been missed, but it is not too late to return to the path of reconciliation and trust.

Talking about problematic parts of the past must no longer be part of informal education or exclusively a civil society initiative. This risks creating mere 'islands', fragments of free spaces populated by those who are ready to know about them. Problematic parts of the past must be included in the collective memory. But is there a chance for a common memory in Bosnia and Herzegovina? Under the current political circumstances, most certainly not. The solution certainly does not lie in compromising about what happened and what we will remember as a collective, but in respecting the facts. However, this is not evident in any of the existing policies.

Nevertheless, different forms of keeping various memories have developed and they create a counterbalance to the official narratives. Hope should be placed in those methods - but also in necessary interaction with officials, and in changing the paradigm about the lack of political will for the democratization of memory culture. This will be a long path, but the right path. Memories, especially those of collectivity, are constructs, and the needs of the present will determine how the past is processed. This means that we need deep social change so that the past can finally become the past. ■■■



# Croatia: facts about the past in the shadow of victorious narratives

Branka Vierda

The war that was fought in Croatia between 1991 and 1995 is defined in the dominant memory, the policies of state institutions and in the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia – i.e., the very foundation of the state – as a “just, legitimate, defensive and liberating Homeland War”.

During the almost thirty years that have passed since the end of the war, the Croatian state has not yet developed a coherent policy of reconciliation through which, in addition to the narrative about the defensive nature of the war, it would also accept the facts that do not fit into this defensive and victorious narrative, but instead constitute the shameful aspects of its heritage.

Moreover, five years after the end of the war, in 2000, when the space for dialogue about the entire truth about the war began to open up, the ruling coalition led by the Social Democratic Party at the time created and officially adopted a document called the *Declaration on the Homeland War* in Parliamentary procedure. *The Declaration on the Homeland War* expanded the official state definition of the wars fought during the 1990s and, in addition to “just and legitimate, defensive and liberating”, added: “and not an aggressive war of conquest against anyone, in which it defended its territory from Greater Serbian aggression within internationally recognized borders.”

The Declaration created a framework for speech in the public sphere and, through state intervention, limited how the war of the 1990s can and should be thought about, arguing that such a dogmatic approach protects the “moral dignity of the Croatian people and all citizens of the Republic of Croatia”. While not legally binding, the influence of this political gesture

reverberates. For example, in Parliamentary debates, where center-left and center-right parties use the Declaration to refuse to discuss that in the verdict on Prlić et.al., Franjo Tuđman was designated a participant in a joint criminal enterprise. (With this verdict, the International Criminal Court for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) established that numerous crimes were committed against the Bosniak population during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which the political and military leadership of Herceg Bosna and the Republic of Croatia, headed by Franjo Tuđman, was held responsible for.)

Furthermore, the perception of the war conditioned by a hermetically sealed and state-defined narrative, inconsistent with the facts established before the ICTY, can logically conceptualize and fit all the crimes committed in the war only as an individual failure of an individual soldier.

Although there are certain improvements in the memory of civilian victims of the minority Serbian people, the institutional and social memory of Croatia is oblivious to the victims of war crimes committed in Bosnia and Herzegovina against Bosniaks by members of the Croatian forces.

There is not even a word about these victims of war crimes and their perpetrators in public space in Croatia. Moreover, the current president Zoran Milanović, in addition to relativizing the genocide committed in Srebrenica in 1995, declared that Milivoj Petković (a member of the “six” sentenced before the ICTY to 20 years in prison for crimes against humanity, violations of the laws and customs of war and serious violations of the Geneva

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Conventions) is not a war criminal. The same Milivoj Petković who wrote in a letter to a judge of the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT) Carmelo Agius, asking for early release, “I accept the verdict and personal responsibility for my actions or omissions that led to the commission of the crime for which I was convicted”.

The commemoration of the military-police operation Oluja illustrates the views of the Croatian state political elite and the majority of the public about what August 5 and Oluja represent in Croatian history. In Croatia, the anniversary of Oluja is a bank holiday, the day when the greatest victory of the Croatian Army in the war is celebrated. At the same time, it is the Day of Homeland Gratitude and the Day of Croatian Veterans. The political elite gather in Knin, designated as the “Croatian royal city”, where then President Franjo Tuđman declared on August 5, 1995 that “the end of Oluja can also be called the Day of the End of the Croatian Historical Cross”. Victory is celebrated with a festive program and civilian victims and military suffering during Oluja are commemorated. On this day, at the Knin fortress, the names of the Croatian victims are read. To date, the names of martyred Serbs and Croatian citizens who were killed by Croatian forces during and after Operation Oluja, have never been read.

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As long as the dominant political forces in Croatia nurture a mythological approach to the wars of the 1990s, it is difficult to imagine the development and normalization of memory politics based on an egalitarian model, i.e. policies that recognize the victims in their suffering and experience during the war, instead of by their ethnicity or nationality, or by the ethnicity and nationality of the perpetrators of the crimes against them.

However, there are also examples of memory politics that approach the events of the 1990s more inclusively and responsibly and do not omit the whole truth. High-ranking state officials, together with representatives of the Serbian people in Croatia, go to Uzdolje and Grubor each year, places where civilians belonging to the Serbian national minority were killed. However, these commemorations are hardly visible for the wider public.

The commemoration ceremony of Oluja was marked not by the reading of names, but at least by reference to the suffering of civilians of Serbian nationality. Given that this anniversary occupies an important place in the public space, such an act makes at least some of the crimes and victims of that period partially visible. (In contrast, the suffering of minority peoples during and after Operations *Bljesak* and *Medački djeb* are completely invisible,



although there are final verdicts before domestic courts along with reports from civil society organizations that attest to some of the suffering of civilians belonging to minority peoples.)

The murders of Serbian civilians in the capital city of Zagreb in December 1991 gained greater visibility and attention from the public and also from political elites, precisely thanks to the persistence and great efforts of civil society. On the thirtieth anniversary of one of these murders, the newly elected mayor of Zagreb, Tomislav Tomašević, emphasized the importance of remembering the civilian victims of the war, regardless of their nationality or ethnicity, and the fact that it is a necessary condition for these crimes not to be repeated. Tomašević is also the first mayor to join the commemoration organized every year by civil society organizations to commemorate the monstrous murder of Aleksandra Zec and her mother Marija in a run-down part of Medvednica, after which their bodies were dumped. The father, Mihajlo, was killed shortly before that in front of their doorstep in the Trešnjevka neighborhood of Zagreb.

Whether changes in official memory policies will materialize at the local level remains to be seen. The visit of Tomislav Tomašević to Sljeme in 2021 and 2022 is certainly a positive example. Another positive example was set by the Prefect of Šibenik-Knin, Marko Jelić, who has been going to Varivode and Grubor for years to commemorate the “minority victims” and hold speeches that, with great respect for all victims, offer a perspective for reconciliation.

With a selective approach to memory, a culture has been nurtured that those in decision-making positions do not have the courage to change, to step outside of nationalist myths in order to acknowledge the sacrifice of the ‘other’ or the different. New generations born after the war are brought up in a collective memory that does not question the dominant mythological narratives about the victim and the victor. Such memory greatly influences the formation of their national identity which is strongly delimited by the ethno-nationalist

legacy of the Homeland War, even more than it is marked by the anti-fascist legacy of the Second World War, in which the peoples of the then Yugoslav territory jointly defeated both domestic and foreign fascist occupiers. Young people are not included in discussions about peace building and the impact of the consequences of war on their generation. “War” topics are reserved for contemporaries and veterans. Memory politics in Croatia includes only the memory of the war, war heroism, military victories and the army. It is above all a “male” topic, a “male” victory for which even great feats of peace, such as the peaceful reintegration of the western Danube region, which was assessed as the most successful peacekeeping mission of the United Nations, do not fit into the narrative, and are therefore not celebrated.

One of the consequences of such selective memory is the low level of positive change both in the perception of others and also in the perception of one’s own national identity. The attitude towards the Serbs has not changed significantly in the prevailing opinion compared to the time of the war. As everyone who lives in Croatia knows, “no mother would want a Serb son-in-law.” The very word “Serb” still sounds like a swear word in many contexts and in Croatia it is simply not desirable to be a Serb. Although the Serbian Democratic Independent Party (SDSS) together with the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) is part of the ruling coalition at the national level, the stigma that Serbs carry in Croatia has not diminished. Moreover, the speeches of politicians belonging to the Serbian national minority in which they call for reconciliation seem not to be taken seriously and fail to reach the majority.

It is extremely important that this situation changes. In addition to the fact that - first of all - the victims deserve public recognition for the suffering they experienced and an apology for the pain caused to them, society in Croatia deserves to know the truth. The new generations deserve freedom and the opportunity to build solidarity both in the present and in their future. ■■

# Kosovo: wartime memories challenged by the courts

Una Hajdari

Considering the reaction that the work of the Specialist Chambers provoked among political leaders in Kosovo over the past two years, one would think that not a single day had been spent preparing the population for war crimes trials since the end of the conflict.

The brainchild of the European Union and the United States, the Specialist Chambers combines the best practices of all other ad hoc international tribunals. Locally, it has widely been perceived as a means to whitewash Serbia's crimes in the 1990s and paint Kosovo Albanians as the "true aggressors" of the 1998-1999 conflict in the country.

This is partially due to a PR campaign, launched by figures such as former president and two-time prime minister Hashim Thaçi and former parliamentary speaker Kadri Veseli, who claim that by having them face trial in the chambers, the West is trying to denigrate the legacy of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and besmirch Kosovo's path towards independence. The campaign is called "Freedom has a name" (*Liria ka emer*) and posters promoting it hang prominently in central Pristina, ad space on TV airs videos of Thaçi, Veseli and others in KLA uniforms and the hashtag #liriakaemer is widely used online. The campaign revealed that Kosovo is by no means done with cracking open the collective trauma, resentment and general perceptions of the 1990s at the behest of political interests.

If anything, the work (and upcoming verdicts) of the Specialist Chambers have redrawn the playing field. In the upcoming years, political battles in Kosovo are likely to be significantly shaped by arguments pertaining to the wartime decade and the widespread belief that Kosovo Albanians owe their freedom to the accused before the Specialist Chambers.

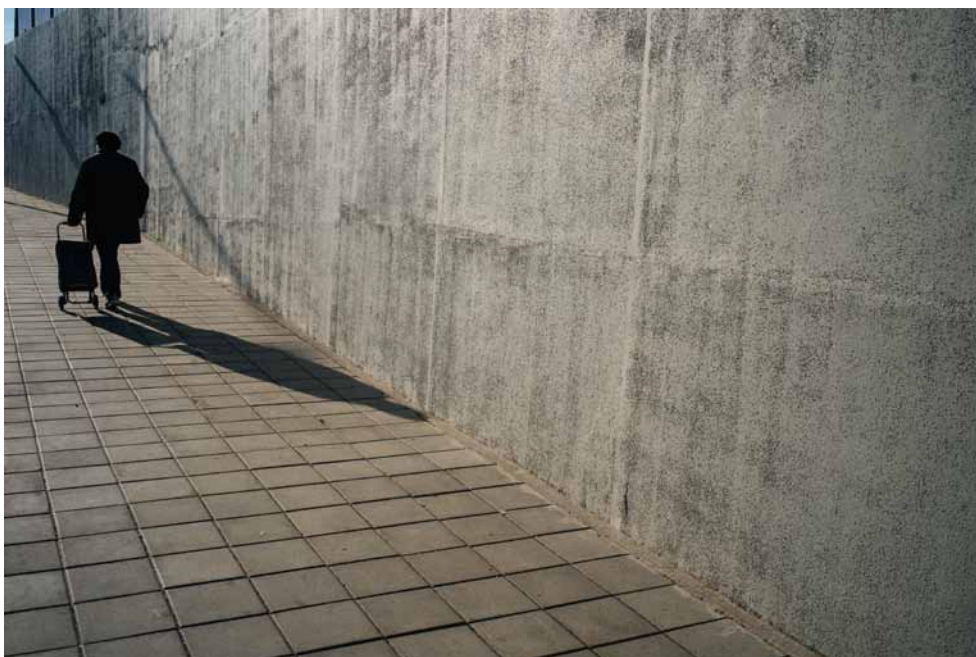
This raw emotion (compounded by the memory of Serbia's brutality during the wartime years when Albanian-language schools had to operate illegally, almost everyone was fired from their jobs and when police brutality was commonplace) created the space for unprecedented political manipulation, which has been used most adeptly by former members of the KLA and their political descendants, the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK). The Specialist Chambers cannot be discussed without taking into consideration the courts established in the period following the NATO bombing in 1999 and following Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008.

The first locally based, internationally staffed court system was the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), tasked with prosecuting sensitive crimes such as war crimes, politically and ethnically motivated crimes, and crimes against humanity. In order to take pressure off the local judiciary, international judges and prosecutors considered to have more experience in dealing with these issues were brought in to ease the pressure on a fragile legal system. It also served as a means to prosecute cases

that were not being taken on by the ICTY, while a few wartime figures from Kosovo, such as Ramush Haradinaj, did get tried in the Hague.

Locals saw the 1999-2008 UNMIK period, when Kosovo was officially a United Nations protectorate in Europe, as deeply offensive, and the nationalist rhetoric steadily rose until 2008. They felt that while all the other Yugoslav successor states were allowed to shape their own destinies – Kosovo was relegated to a stunted independence. While Kosovo held elections, had its own government and institutions, UNMIK had the final say on key topics. Kosovars felt they were being punished for Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence, while the fact that they were expected to allow their "war heroes" to be prosecuted by the UN did not help.

The party that was the most resentful of this was the PDK, led by Hashim Thaçi. The PDK were furious that while they claimed to have "fought" and "liberated" Kosovo, they ended up in the opposition for years after the war and had to watch LDK – a party which, in their eyes, had not seen any fighting, and even negotiated with the government of Slobodan Milosevic – form successive Kosovo governments. This talking point was particularly abused by figures such as Thaçi, who engaged an egregious PR team to rebrand him as the father of the nation. This resulted in Thaçi's first political position since the end of the war. In 2007, Thaçi became the prime minister and the man to go down in history as having declared Kosovo's independence in February 2008. It



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is likely that after a couple of decades pass, the time when PDK was in power, during which their total monopolization of the rhetoric around the war cemented them as the “sole” liberators of the country, will be observed more objectively.

If today, however, one opens any history textbook from Kosovo, one will likely see Thaçi and the KLA referred to as a force to be reckoned with, a force that managed to beat the Yugoslav army and its allies. Ironically, some have argued that the KLA would have received more praise if it did not try to present itself as a majestic army, but rather as what it was – a guerilla force that managed, due to its knowledge of the local terrain and successful employment of surprise tactics, to one-up the far superior and better equipped Yugoslav forces.

After Council of Europe rapporteur Dick Marty published his 2011 report on war crimes perpetrated by the KLA during the peak of the conflict in Kosovo, the EU assigned a task force to investigate the claims. Some were thrown out, such as the claim of organized organ trafficking, while others were confirmed. The main name in the report? Hashim Thaçi.

It became clear that these cases needed to be investigated and subsequently prosecuted. For Thaçi, who was into his second term as Prime Minister at the time, this proved to be a challenge. After assuming power in 2007, he shed most of his ultra-nationalist talking points, launched into an EU-facilitated dialogue with Serbia, openly promoted integration and a closer relationship with the Serb community in the country. For Thaçi to go against the establishment of such a court would make Kosovo seem like it was unwilling to follow the advice of its international allies and reject the administration of justice. On the other hand, the court would clearly dig into the legacy of the KLA, which was the foundation on which Thaçi built his power on.

The EU, in what has been a largely underappreciated move, not only wanted to set up the court – it wanted it to be a Kosovo court. If it was based on the country's laws, if it was an extension of the local judiciary, then it would not be hostile outsiders forcing judgements onto Kosovo heroes. But

in order for that to happen, the constitution needed to be changed. The only person who held that much sway in Kosovo's parliament was Thaçi himself, and in August 2015, he managed to strongarm a 2/3 double majority needed to amend the Kosovo constitution and attached a Chamber to every level of the country's court system. Unlike other non-Dutch courts in the Hague, it is not an international court. It is merely a displaced one – moved outside the country to allow for better witness protection and less interference in legal processes. The setup of the court has so far been unprecedented in the former Yugoslav region.

For all the attempts by many – including Albanian prime minister Edi Rama – to discredit the court as being orchestrated by Serbia, the court does not only focus on crimes committed against Kosovo Serbs. In fact, in the first war crimes verdict issued in December 2022 against Salih Mustafa, all the victims were Kosovo Albanians.

In the severely redacted indictments that have been made public, the main charges are for illegally detaining, torturing and murdering perceived political opponents. Many of the victims are believed to be Albanians who either did not outright support the KLA, who collaborated with their Serb neighbors, supported the LDK or collaborated with the Yugoslav authorities.

The verdicts of these trials, if interpreted properly, could be extremely therapeutic for Kosovo's post-war society. It is easy to write off crimes perpetrated by “the other side” as being inspired by blind hate. What does it mean when the true cause of Albanian-on-Albanian crime is understood by the wider society? It is easier to see both the victim and the perpetrator as human (even the vilest humans) if they belong to your “tribe” and as such it could even lead to a more humane approach to Serb victims from Kosovo.

Of course, Thaçi and others will continue to depict this as an attack on Kosovo as a whole, against its very existence. Those who truly want Kosovo to be a harmonious post-war society – perhaps braver than any other in the region – need to see it as an attempt for ignored and whitewashed aspects of its past to finally be brought to light. ■■■

# Montenegro: is there anything to remember at all?

Miloš Vukanović

For almost two decades, Montenegrin society has played the role of a stable civil society that is moving maturely towards a European future. However, that performance was accompanied by an intense process of sweeping one's own unwanted and difficult heritage under the rug. Today, when the unstable political situation has almost shattered the mask of Montenegro as the star pupil of the region, it should not be surprising that daily politics are often preoccupied with topics from the past.

The failure to build a memory culture in Montenegro is related to two periods of the Montenegrin past with the greatest influence on daily politics: the period of the Second World War and the period of the 1990s. Specifically, this is not about these two time-historical periods, but about the political and ideological concepts that arose in those periods, which have shaped modern Montenegrin society. These are the concepts of anti-fascism and the anti-war movement.

The importance of these two concepts is that they were created on the foundations of tolerance and coexistence built in the principality and kingdom of the Petrovićs, which in turn served as the foundation of the Montenegrin national identity. This development of fundamental values is the essence from which the idea of Montenegrin civil society arose. However, this did not prevent the deviant trends of transitional politics from contaminating these two concepts and fundamentally threatening their value.

The anti-fascist culture of memory was launched after the establishment of the Socialist Federal Republic Yugoslavia, when the construction of a new social and economic order began. Social transformation also included the construction of new values in the memory culture, largely based on the sacrifices and victories won during the Second World War.

In the republics created by the breakup of Yugoslavia, the anti-fascist legacy took on a similar, yet different form. For Montenegro, the anti-fascist legacy represents the establishment of a republican and civil social organization that replaced belonging to a national and religious framework with belonging to the state. It is a legacy that emphasizes social and gender equality. As such, the anti-fascist heritage represents a key evolutionary phase of Montenegrin society and, although it is sometimes difficult to understand, Montenegro's fundamental and historical turn towards European values.

A significant part of building a memory culture included the erection of a huge number of monuments, memorial plaques and memorial busts, the establishment of NOB<sup>1</sup> museums, memorial museums, as well as the incorporation of partisan heritage into local museums. Additionally, despite certain misconceptions, the construction of a culture of memory in communist Yugoslavia did not ignore the crimes of both the occupiers and domestic collaborators.

<sup>1</sup> T/N: NOB – Narodnooslobodilački rat – the People's Liberation War

The breakup of Yugoslavia brought nationalist extremism, largely based on defeated ideas from World War II. In such a world, there was no place for anti-fascist heritage, which was exclusively viewed through the prism of the anti-national socialist heritage. The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the end of communist rule brought new political and ideological perceptions in Montenegro. The population, fundamentally loyal to the anti-fascist idea, found itself in an identity gap between the national and religious renewal of the fall of communism, the defense of the Yugoslav idea and the search for their own identity. Reduced to an obedient province of Belgrade, without a political elite that had the courage to step forward independently in the uncertain 1990s, Montenegro was basically a frozen observer of the events around it, with a few tragic and bloody episodes that will forever remain a stain on its history.

The national and political awakening of the citizens of Montenegro, which intensified in the second half of the 1990s, and which resulted in the restoration of independence in 2006, was supposed to overcome the traditional division of the population into two antagonistic camps. However, the stalled transition, social inequality and failure to develop institutions

at the end of the second decade of the 21st century only exposed the fact that divisions in Montenegro are more alive than ever.

In such an atmosphere, anti-fascism and the anti-fascist heritage of Montenegro was first forgotten for a long time before later being somewhat revived, as it was proclaimed one of the fundamental values of Montenegrin society. After that proclamation, it essentially became a weapon on the political scene. During the 1990s, but also in the first decade of the 21st century, anti-fascism and the anti-fascist heritage in Montenegro were frozen in time by the state, while on opposing poles of the political scene, narratives that rejected it with contempt grew. Anti-fascism during the 1990s essentially represented an undesirable legacy that had been left to rot. The political successor of the Communist Party, the Democratic Party of Socialists, first ignored it for a decade and never really knew what to do with the anti-fascist legacy. It was only in the last decade that ideas about the wider incorporation of anti-fascism into the Montenegrin national and civil being appeared.

Simultaneously, the ideology that is the backbone of pro-Belgrade politics today was the primary generator of revisionism related to the anti-fascist heritage. On the waves of national and religious revival,

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that ideology worked intensively for three decades to revive the defeated ideology of the Chetnik movement. Through evolution, the Chetnik ideology incorporated certain social structures that have anti-fascism at their core, and from supporting the pro-Western anti-communist course, it turned toward the pro-Russian and Putinophile course.

In such a distribution of forces, there was a perversion of the idea of anti-fascism. The recent government finally tried to incorporate anti-fascism into the Montenegrin civil being while at the same time fueling extremism and enormous social differences. However, the parties that won power after 2020 ostensibly want to build Montenegro on civil and anti-fascist foundations, but at the same time revitalize the Chetnik movement, while giving massive concessions to the primary negator of anti-fascism, the Orthodox Church.

This relationship creates a confused atmosphere in which anti-fascism has become a political platitude without intrinsic value.

Unlike the anti-fascist legacy, the anti-war legacy suffered a much more explicit fate. After twenty years of manipulation and improvisation, dodging responsibility and making compromises where there should not have been any, the anti-war legacy as part of facing the past and the crimes committed during the wars of the 1990s was reduced to a peripheral, insignificant idea worn out in political relativism. In parallel, almost all the events of the 1990s have become episodes of the past that hang like a weight around the neck of Montenegrin society, making progress even more difficult and returning with a vengeance during political crises.

After Montenegro distanced itself from Milošević's policies in the mid-1990s, it also moved away from the narrative that led to Montenegro's participation in the wars during the breakup of Yugoslavia. By increasing the autonomy of Montenegro within the state union and the subsequent restoration of independence, steps were taken to improve relations with its neighbors, and on the international level the damage done to Montenegro's reputation was somewhat alleviated.

An official apology was given to the Croatian people for the attack on Dubrovnik, reparations were paid to Croats and Bosniaks, Montenegro cooperated with the Hague Tribunal and responsibility for

the most serious crimes was assumed. With these moves, Montenegro was removed from the focus of international condemnation for the destruction of the 1990s, which almost completely shifted to Serbia.

Yet on the local level, things were not so promising. Intoxicated by successes on the international level, limited by the traditional Montenegrin willingness to sweep difficult topics under the rug and the unwillingness of state authorities to develop the process of transitional justice, the Montenegrin authorities reduced the process of facing the past to a farce on all issues.

The decades-long government has obstructed the court proceedings of those accused of war crimes, resisted the creation of adequate textbooks, the installation of memorials at sites of crimes, and dulled the edge of criticism. The monument unveiled in 2011 with the inscription: "To all civilian victims of the wars in the territory of the former Yugoslavia from 1991 to 2001" simply relativized the victims by equating, for example, the innocent victims of the attack on Dubrovnik with those who committed aggression. Regional anti-war heroes were promoted, while local heroes and activists were either forgotten or systematically marginalized.

In the period from 2006 to 2020, the Montenegrin authorities portrayed the achieved "results" as crucial for regional and intra-state reconciliation, while the civic opposition and the NGO sector warned that this selective, ephemeral and politicized approach could only lead to the abuse of memory culture. Calls for caution, arguing that a disingenuous approach to this topic could cause social problems later, fell on deaf ears but proved prescient.

In 2020, Montenegrin society started undergoing significant political and social changes, accompanied by an obviously misused and distorted image of the past, primarily about the events of the 1990s.

This approach has resulted in the current attitude towards memory culture being worse than before 2020. Srebrenica has become a tool for political blackmail, the Parliament has heard challenges to internationally established court rulings, while the attack on Dubrovnik has been partially forgotten.

The perfidious abuse of the past in order to achieve political victories and the whitewashing of those who continue to promote the same ideology that pushed us into chaos in the 1990s is the most

concrete outcome of limiting the process of transitional justice, selectivity and deliberate limitation of building a memory culture. Another legacy of such an approach is that transitional justice, after being used for political gain, has been halted or reduced, not to a facade, but to folklore.

Today, it is obvious that during the past two decades, another process was developing in parallel. The public may not have been vocal enough in supporting or opposing the adequate construction of a memory culture and facing the past, but from the perspective of 2022, something else is obvious. There was considerable resistance within a section of the public aimed at preventing this. That resistance and the authorities' own reluctance fed off each other.

A key casualty of this attitude towards heritage in the 1990s is the marginalization of the anti-war legacy, the legacy from which most civic-oriented progressive social currents emerged. Although there are many factors, the civic actors are certainly at least partially responsible, all these processes actively contested the development of civic and political ideas born from the anti-war movement, and therefore crippled the development of democracy.

In Montenegro today, facing the past and building a memory culture are political weapons. This is the most obvious consequence of a disastrous two-decade long approach, but also a symptom of a society that has lost its patience, and therefore its mask of self-imposed politeness.

The Montenegrin case of facing the recent past can be studied as a sociological example of the damage an unfinished process of transitional justice can have on society. After twenty years, Montenegrin society has undoubtedly matured to face the mistakes of its past. Yet it has not strengthened enough to resist populist narratives, the same ones that once led us to war, destruction and poverty.

For a long time, Montenegro pretended that it did not have much to remember from the perspective of the painful past. This approach had worked in many ways on both the internal and international level. However, it ignored the potential consequences of such an approach within Montenegrin society. We are now paying the price for that unwanted legacy. ■■■

# North Macedonia: amnesty and silence around the 2001 insurgency

Prof. dr Irena Stefanoska

The seven-month armed conflict in the Republic of Macedonia which began in January 2001 between the Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) and the Macedonian security forces ended when the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) was signed in August 2001. The peace deal was seen as a basis for improving the rights of the largest minority in the country, the ethnic Albanians. In September 2002 the Parliament passed the Amnesty Law that granted amnesty to all members of military formations suspected of criminal offenses during the armed conflict. According to the law, the amnesty did not apply to offenses investigated by the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

The international community which supported the OFA openly backed the Amnesty Law. Representatives of the US State Department argued that it was an important step towards the implementation of the OFA and furthermore, a vital instrument for peace and reconciliation in the Republic of Macedonia. The Secretary General of the Council of Europe at the time, Walter Schwimmer, assessed that it was an “encouraging step” by the Macedonian authorities toward stability. However, in a letter to President Boris Trajkovski, representatives of Human Rights Watch pointed out that while the organization did not oppose an amnesty per se, investigating

violations of international humanitarian law either by the ICTY or by the Macedonian authorities should remain possible.

Although the amnesty did not apply to crimes against humanity, there were no war crimes trials in Macedonia. In 2002, the ICTY took the jurisdiction over the five war crime cases.

A few years later, the ICTY brought charges against the former minister of interior Ljube Boskoski and against a senior police officer, Johan Tarculovski.<sup>1</sup> The other four cases<sup>2</sup> related to alleged crimes committed by the ethnic Albanian guerillas/NLA were transferred to the Macedonian courts in 2008.

During the negotiations for a new government between right-wing VMRO-DPMNE party and the largest ethnic Albanian party DUI (consisting of former NLA members), the four cases became a part of the post-election deal between the party leaders Nikola Gruevski and Ali Ahmeti. As an outcome of the deal, the Macedonian Parliament adopted an “authentic interpretation” of the 2002 Amnesty law which obliged the Office of the Public Prosecutor and all courts in the country to halt procedures related to the four cases.

1 While Lj. Boskoski was acquitted of all charges, J. Tarculovski was handed a single sentence of 12 years imprisonment. He served two-thirds of his sentence and was freed by the Hague Tribunal.

2 “NLA leadership”, “Mavrovo Road Workers”, “Lipkovo Water Reserve” and “Neprosteno”.

The social democrats, the main oppositional force at the time, accused the government of political interference in prosecution. The government argued that a mistake from the past would be corrected given that the ICTY cases were not supposed to be re-investigated. Moreover, some VMRO-DPMNE legislators, supporters of this “interpretation” of the law, claimed that by not prosecuting the four cases, the painful memory of the 2001 conflict would vanish, allowing the country to move forward.

In other words, the rhetoric of transitional justice and reconciliation was just a political tool used by ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian government officials. A decision was made which terminated the investigation and prosecution of the four war crime cases.

Amnesty International promptly argued that “the prosecution of violations of international humanitarian law cannot be subject to political interference [...] the parliament appears to have created a climate of impunity for persons suspected of violations of international humanitarian law, including members of the government itself”. Disappointed families of the kidnapped and missing ethnic Macedonians also reacted to Parliament’s decision. “The Prime Minister Gruevski told us that there

would not be an amnesty for the so-called Hague cases [...] we are very surprised”. The Macedonian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights also said that it “urges for efforts to be made for the cases to be resolved in compliance with the international law and the rule of law principle”.

Based on this, it can be concluded that the international judicial intervention goals, including the enforcement of reconciliation, have not been met in the Republic of Macedonia. The transitional justice was left to negotiations between the conflicted sides. It made the process appear as less of a common effort to achieve justice and more of an effort to achieve a power balance between the conflicted groups. Furthermore, the political deal to hush the ICTY cases had a serious implication on the conduct of the national political parties, who have used the cases to strengthen nationalist rhetoric, mobilize voters and get larger support by their relevant ethnic groups.

Twenty years after the Amnesty Law was adopted along with its “authentic interpretation”, the Macedonian society barely remembers the event. However, this does not mean that the fragmentary and scattered memories of the 2001-armed conflict vanished. The amnesty law has been mentioned infrequently, usually

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in contexts when other amnesties were granted, such as those for the “Storming of the Macedonian Parliament”, also known as “Bloody Thursday” (April 27, 2017) and the more recent 2019 Amnesty Law.

Undoubtedly, the goal of the Amnesty Law from 2002, covering the participants in the 2001-armed conflict, was to stabilize society at the time. However, along with this stabilization, an important “window” was closed, one which tells an important story about the conflict itself.

The requests of experts and human rights advocates who were suggesting ways for Macedonia to better deal with its past (even before the 2001 armed conflict) remained unfulfilled. On the one hand, as Mirjana Najchevska explained in 2005, no one was punished, no one was morally sanctioned, no one pointed at violations and violators; injustices were not talked about and losses of those who suffered were not compensated. On the other hand, alternative instruments and mechanisms for dealing with the past remained unused.

This includes showing empathy for other perspectives involved in the discussion; recognizing the pain and injustice experienced by each of the groups which could bring the opportunity to express pain and let it be heard. The aim isn't to push a community to fall back on its trauma, but to recognize the trauma of the other.

The philosophy of collective amnesia<sup>3</sup> and its legacy, openly promoted by the political elites and backed by the international community so that the society is focused on its future, only maintained the divide, and obstructed the efforts to bridge the diametrically opposed viewpoints related to the 2001-armed conflict.

The first perspective speaks about the triumph of the ethnic Albanians, whereas the other is all about defeat and loss among the ethnic Macedonians. Depending on the political circumstances, these images pop up at the surface as phantoms before disappearing “underground” in the divided society. When the identification of the various injustices of the past and a dialogue about them are absent, such a past, unfaced and forgotten, becomes a “site of memory” that feeds the feelings only of injustices done to “us” and can provide fuel to future conflict. ■■■

3 B.Vankovska, „Соочување со минатото во Македонија: Уште еден предизвик на постконфликтната рехабилитација или не?“ (“Facing the Past in Macedonia: One More Challenge of the Post-Conflict Rehabilitation or not?”), in: B. Vankovska (ed.), *Справување со конфликтното минато ...*, 24; 5- 28.

# towards politics of hope: an interview with Orli Fridman

How does the Western Balkans region compare with the rest of the world when it comes to dealing with the past?

The topic itself – the ways in which societies deal with difficult pasts is not new when addressed globally and comparatively. Many societies share similar dynamics and even struggles, in cases when the past becomes a deeply divisive matter, politically and socially. Such divisions allow us to track and analyze the ‘politics of memory’ as a vibrant arena of political struggles. They also allow us to compare and learn from actions taken by various actors; from administrators of memory (state officials) who put forward policies and memory laws as they establish the hegemonic memories, to the claims of members of various community of memories -- which can support the hegemony or stand in a complete opposition to it.

In the Western Balkans, or more precisely in the post-Yugoslav space, when it comes to the memory politics of the wars of the break-up of Yugoslavia, along with many conflicting narratives about the events and especially the crimes committed in the 1990s, various communities of memory have their own claims and perception of that past, in order to promote their political agenda(s) in the present. Some of those communities and actors have more political power than others, some are more marginal (for example, see the difference between war veterans in Croatia vs. veterans in Serbia), all trying to shape the present, referencing the past, claiming certain narratives and truths.

Still, the work of all of those various communities of memory, including the claims of what I approach as yet another community of memory: of anti-war activists, who later on have become memory activists, intersect. Memory activism as a branch of peace activism/ anti-war activism, cannot be understood on the national level only, as it also travels (transnationally) and circulates (regionally). In that sense, I approach the successor states of the former Yugoslavia, as a “region of memory” – as the labor and actions of different groups of activists brings them together, and in some junctions make their work connected and interrelated. At the heart of that memory work is the approach to the past which goes beyond ethnicity, as well as the rejection of the politics of victimization.



Still, there are narratives propelled by certain communities of memory that are dominant in each society and are promoted and even used by the authorities.

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Indeed, in the successor states of the former Yugoslavia and the creation of those as nation states, memory and the past has become an object of conflict and struggle. Three decades after the wars of the 1990s, new memory regimes are in place in each of these states and the order of memories has been successfully narrowed and nationalized. Memory abuses were common practice among politicians and intellectuals during the 1990s and have continued to flourish in subsequent decades. Arguably, the Yugoslav master commemorative narrative was replaced in each of the successor states with a new master commemorative narrative aimed at strengthening national identities.

It is possible to trace the creation of those through the analysis of the new calendars that have been shaped, and still are being shaped in each of these states. In my analysis, I show how the ongoing social organization of memory and editing of the past are reflected in the new calendars.

More so, the analysis of alternative calendars as sites of (counter) memory, as established by the works of memory activists, allow us also to trace the establishment of alternative commemorations, as spaces of acknowledgment, empathy and commemorative solidarity.

There is a sense among many memory activists that all of this work was done in vain, due to the broad acceptance of “official” and nationalist interpretations of the past.

The fatigue of many people engaged in these activities is not surprising, especially given the reality in which they function: that of revisionism and of nationalist hegemonic interpretations and (mis)uses of the past, as well as often standing against politics of denial. There is very little space or acknowledgment for people who labor with these memories and attempt to combat denial, yet we must not ignore the fact that they did manage to create alternative and civic platforms, though extremely marginalized, and important spaces for remembrance where this struggle with “official” narratives is still being waged.

One of the aims in my own research and writing was to shed light on the works and efforts and the creation of those networks of commemorative solidarity that have been ongoing for a number of decades in Serbia and, more broadly, in the region. Memory activists from Belgrade to Zagreb to Sarajevo or Pristina are indeed marginalized in their own societies, in some cases even marked as traitors, yet they

succeeded in claiming agency and space for civic and political action within an overwhelmingly revisionist public discourses, which is not a small achievement even though it often is disregarded.

What could those fighting for truthful representation of the wartime past do differently to better stand up to forces who enjoy public support because they promote state-sponsored narratives?

One possible answer is for those who are dealing with the legacies and consequences of the Wars of the 1990s, and with other marginalized issues, to find ways and see the interest in creating stronger networks of joint civic action and give more support to each other. The creation of networks in which various movements, organizations and individual activists would collaborate and support each other in their actions and share the public space, and by doing so, enhance others' messages, and more broadly the impact of their work.

In your book, you introduced the concept of "unwanted memories", which 'facing the past' activism usually brings forth. Having the regional perspective in mind, do you think that the resistance to acknowledging these unwanted memories is going to crack any time soon?

In the book I examine the work and the mnemonic practices of memory activists with alternative knowledge of silenced and unwanted pasts, as they disseminate alternative knowledge and counter-memories of the 1990s. Street actions, public tours, and art are all ways that activists are attempting to push the discussion into new spaces and insisting on continued engagement with otherwise silenced and unwanted past(s).

The concept of unwanted memories, among other things, raises this question – to what extent today's societies in the region are willing to engage with questions that are suppressed and that are being misused and falsified. When you have incidents like the case of the mural of Ratko Mladić in Belgrade, you can see that there is a real, even physical, struggle between contradicting and opposing views of the facts and legacies of the wars and war crimes. On the other hand, the impression is that the broader public is mostly tired of these topics and discussions surrounding "unwanted memories". The memories of the 1990s in Serbia, as I show, are memories that people would rather avoid or put aside, and yet often reference anyway, almost in passing, especially in the context of unexpected disruptions to their daily routine. These are related not only to the wars but also to the social, political and economic conditions as were present in the 1990s. Looking at these unwanted memories through the prism of generations, among memory activists, reveals the need to continue and tackle these issues. In the last three decades, different generations of memory activists – those who have living memories of the 1990s while fighting against nationalism and wars, to the generations born during and even after the 1990s: generations that don't have a living memory of the wars but are still engaged in those mnemonic struggles. The younger generation may have come up with additional tactics, such as #hashtag #memoryactivism and digital practices, yet they are still fighting from the margins.

Do you agree with the assessment that they are unsuccessful?

I think the struggle is not over yet. I also think that particularly in Serbia, but also more broadly in the region, where the politics of disappointment has prevailed, continuing to engage in civic and political action remains a great challenge. The works of memory activists, as I discuss



in the book, allows for engagement with civic memories which emerge as counter-memories to those centering victimization only. Through the generational belonging of these activists, we can also trace more broadly the legacy of activism and of civic action from below, what can be referred to as 'memory of activism'. Memory activists in the region have produced a reliable track record and invaluable body of knowledge that is available to the public because of their resilience and courage to never back down in their fight and to defend the public space they claimed, all while they've worked tirelessly facing many adversities. This is clearly an achievement and a legacy which will be available too, to the future generations of citizens and activists alike.

What do you think about the future of these efforts?

I think that in the world that we're living in today, and we clearly see it globally, it is extremely difficult to find hope in this kind of work, which is going to become a very relevant question in the future. How do people who deal with these sensitive topics in such hostile environments continue to find motivation and to keep on being engaged, to continue and aspire for their work to bring about societal changes?

In the field of memory activism, for those engaged in this work today, I think that for them it is very important to find inspiration in similar struggles. In that sense, for example, in societies (in the Balkans) that glorify war criminals, younger generations of activists have to look backwards in order to find their own heroes, and they may find them in the works of those who resisted nationalism, war and violence as the wars were being waged. Passing on this legacy, preserving it but also learning from it (and its mistakes), is happening now and will continue to evolve in the future. That requires that we center the discussion around the study of *hope* in memory activism, as it may offer an alternative to the politics of disappointment so overwhelmingly present in Serbia and in the region today.

Could you expand on that? What does the concept of politics of hope entail?

I think about it in terms of the overwhelming disappointment in any efforts that would bring about positive changes in the aftermath of the wars in former Yugoslavia for ordinary citizens. Obviously, these disappointments have their different nuances in each society in the region, but nevertheless, some dominant issues, like social justice and socio-economic rights, are shared across the region. I think that there is a need to address the prevailing politics of disappointment in order to be able to search for the politics of hope, and if we zoom out a little bit, I believe it may be possible to find and strengthen some existing platforms for social change. Activism and claims that insist on the creation of platforms that go beyond ethnicity only and discourses of victimization have the potential for broader civic engagement and that includes memory activism, and way beyond that too.

Dr. Orli Fridman is an associate professor at the Belgrade based Faculty of Media and Communications (FMK) and the academic director of the School for International Training (SIT) learning center in Belgrade. Her recent book *Memory Activism and Digital Practices after Conflict: Unwanted Memories (2022)* is available from Amsterdam University Press.

The interview with Dr. Orli Fridman led by Miloš Ćirić was conducted in Belgrade in December 2022. ■■

# the case of Prijedor: struggle for victims' recognition

Edin Ramulić

The end of the war imposed unfavorable conditions for us to face the past. The formerly multi-ethnic community of Prijedor was not only physically separated, but also deeply divided by hatred, nationalism, religious and cultural intolerance. The non-Serb population that had to go into exile was left without their property, and the priority for these people was to solve existential issues. Almost everyone carried with them some traumatic experience from the war.

The Serbian population that remained in Prijedor also suffered during the war. The local economy was almost destroyed and workers were sent to the battlefields, from which more than 500 never returned. The black market, sanctions and years of scarcity have exhausted the people. The Serbs considered themselves the victors and refused any kind of re-mingling with their former war enemies, meaning all Bosniaks and Croats.

We started our work on facing the past and reconstructing the multi-ethnic community in Prijedor 30 kilometers away, in Sanski Most, where the largest concentration of Prijedor refugees resided. People there lived in extreme poverty. Yet, they were unusually connected, united and full of optimism and euphoria in such circumstances, because the war had just ended. This created the potential for positive energy which we directed towards advocacy and preparations for returning to Prijedor.

The first major thing we did was to establish the radio station Slobodni Radio Prijedor<sup>1</sup> and the newspaper Prijedorsko ogledalo<sup>2</sup> with the financial support of the people of Prijedor in the diaspora. This was the first time that refugees had their own media. When broadcasting our program, we were careful not to endanger the possibility of living together again, which was rare for the media at the time.

At the same time, we started another important project - we established a database of Prijedor citizens who had gone missing during the war. In 1998, we already put out the first edition of the book of missing persons. By the third edition, we had collected data for 3,176 missing citizens of Prijedor. As an editor, I insisted on precise data and that we do not divide the victims by nationality. The book would become an important tool in finding remains and identifying missing persons. Its greatest value is the fact that it was and remains a barrier to deniers of war crimes in Prijedor.

We hoped that, as people started returning, a dialogue about the difficult legacy of the past and the consequences of the war would also begin. That did not happen. The Serbian side didn't want that, but the leaders of the other side didn't do anything about it either. At that time, everything was subordinated to returning and rebuilding homes, streets and neighborhoods.

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1 T/N: "Radio Free Prijedor"

2 T/N: Prijedor Mirror

The Serbian authorities reacted to people returning by erecting monuments to fallen fighters, in order to intimidate them. Soon concrete behemoths littered almost all public areas, especially in front of schools and public institutions.

Only a few people from Prijedor dealt with the difficult legacy of the war, we acted through an association with a few more individuals involved. We started visiting and commemorating the places of mass suffering. Although over a thousand people would come to some of the commemorations, we saw that they did not open up the possibility of dialogue, because no one from the local Serbian community came. Our challenge was the main street in Prijedor. When I invited people to a peaceful walk in 2008 to mark Human Rights Day, about 200 family members of missing persons responded. The result of those actions was that the locations of some mass graves, including the largest one at Tomašica with 435 exhumed bodies, were discovered based on information from local Serbs.

We were persistent in our attempts to initiate dialogue within the community. We organized forums, conferences, film screenings and took out spots in local media. It was important for us to have both sides of the war present at all these activities.

In the beginning, they had no theoretical knowledge about the process and techniques of dealing with the past, memory culture, transitional justice, or about the German experience after the Second World War. We worked instinctively, guided by logic and intuition. Over time, as I became familiar with the theory of transitional justice, I realized that we, with greater or lesser success, began or participated in almost everything the theory predicts.

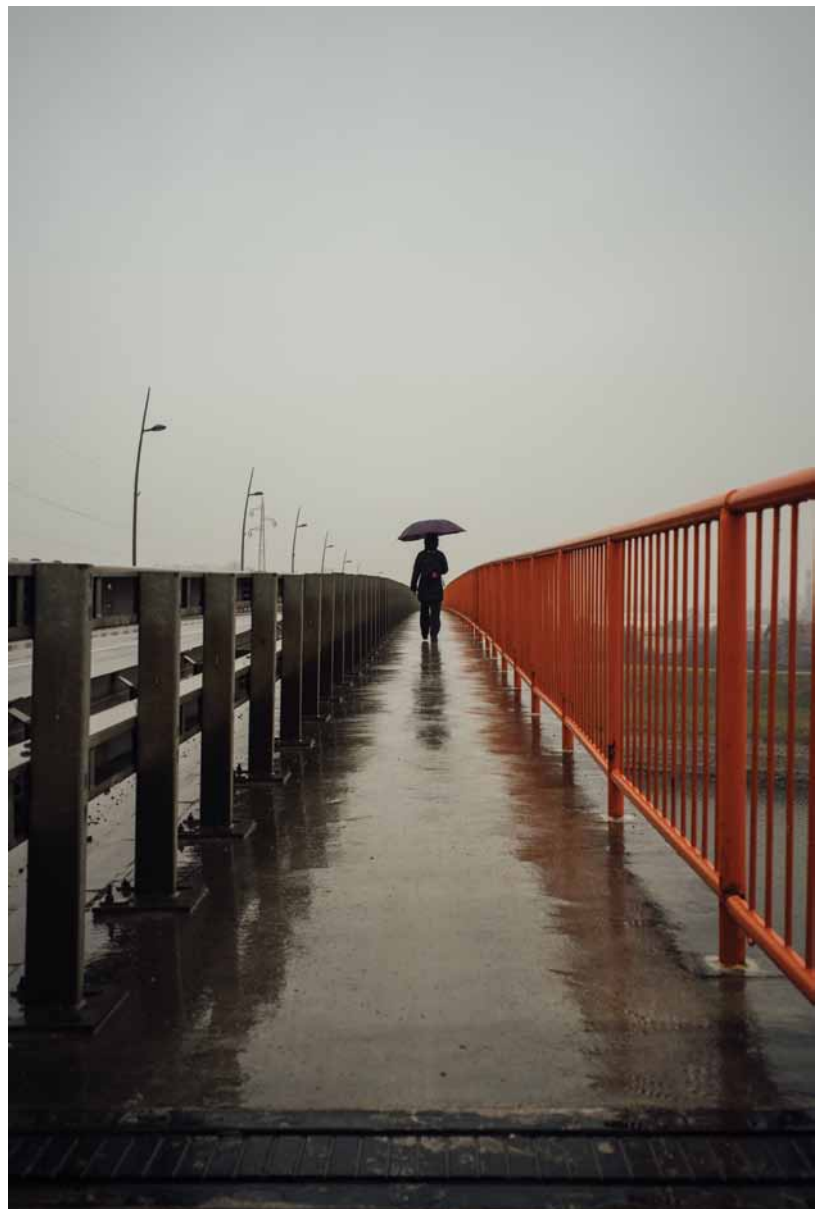
We actively participated in the drafting of legal solutions, the Law on Missing Persons, Amendments to the Law on Civilian Victims of War. We took a step forward with symbolic reparations as well. In 2003, I took advantage of the commemoration in the Keraterm camp and placed a commemorative plaque there, which is still standing today. Two decades later, not a single other camp on the territory of Republika Srpska has been marked.

Considering the number of people involved and the resources we had at our disposal, we achieved visible results. Unlike other cities in the area, the authorities in

Prijedor never denied war crimes, nor the existence of camps and mass graves.

The results would have been more visible and the situation would have been more favorable if two conflicting narratives had not been developed and strengthened alongside our efforts. On the one hand, there is a dominant Serbian narrative, supported by local and entity authorities, veterans' organizations and the Serbian Orthodox Church. They erected over 80 monuments, continue to organize parades and processions through the city streets several times a year, paint murals with nationalist and religious symbols, and print monographs about war units. Recently, through this narrative, a series of organizations promoting Serbian nationalism are being financed.

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On the other hand, the Bosniak narrative was also developing, led by politicians from Bosniak parties and religious leaders from the Islamic community. So far, they have erected more than 30 monuments and commemorative plaques. The difference being that they were erected in less visible places, in Bosniak settlements or within the sacred space of the Islamic community. Everything that happens within that narrative is intended exclusively for Bosniaks and there is not the slightest intention to involve local Serbs. The pinnacle of these activities was announcing the construction of a memorial center in a Bosniak village within the sacred space, with people being invited to hand over artifacts related to the war for safekeeping in the local mosque.

In such conditions, it would be difficult to compete with those narratives if we did not develop and introduce new approaches.

When, on the twentieth anniversary of the beginning of the war, the authorities in Prijedor forbade the commemoration of murdered women and girls for the first time, we reacted by creating the Day of White Ribbons. We took the white ribbon as a symbol from the period at the beginning of the war, at the end of May 1992, when authorities forced the non-Serb population to mark their houses and apartments with white flags. If they went out into the street, they were obliged to wear a white ribbon on their arm. We used that symbol to fight against discrimination twenty years later. We internationalized our struggle which forced the authorities to give way. More than 200 human rights activists gathered at the next commemoration in Prijedor. They came from all over BiH and surrounding countries to support us. Together, we established the civil initiative *Jer me se tiče*<sup>3</sup>, which had the task of coordinating these actions in the future, to react in environments where minority communities are denied the right to remember victims.

A special breakthrough happened when we cooperated on the street with young people from the Kwart Youth Center. They soon became the most vocal in confronting the past in Prijedor, even though they came from Serbian families and were put under great pressure. They were our biggest victory up until that time in the fight for a narrative based on facts and a healthy attitude towards the past.

However, we also wanted a physical victory, so we supported an initiative by the parents of the murdered children to erect a monument in the city for one hundred and two children. We were so close to achieving the goal. The previous mayor had agreed, as did representatives of all political parties. There was just one more small step needed: the local parliament had to formally approve the location. This didn't happen, as the nationalist narratives had a common interest in not allowing this symbolic victory of ours. They knew very well that when the parents of the murdered children received that monument, it would be the beginning of the end of nationalist narratives in Prijedor. Those two local narratives, which are an integral part of the strategies of political parties, are not our biggest obstacle. We are more constrained by loneliness, because there is almost no other local community in Bosnia and Herzegovina where there is a different approach to the narrative of the past other than the national.

Our human, activist and supranational approach which we addressed the authorities and citizens with - *let's be people*, has pushed the boundaries even in such a rigid environment as Prijedor, nationally divided and burdened by the heavy legacy of war crimes and unresolved issues of victims. Whoever follows that path in their own environment will not have to be a pioneer. ■■■

3 T/N: Because it concerns me

# decades of women-led initiatives for peace

Marijana Stojčić

When Yugoslavia is mentioned today, most people think of its bloody disintegration during the 1990s. Those more informed on the subject might think of 140,000 casualties, 4 million refugees, billions of dollars in damage, mass crimes and genocide. Those even more informed may talk about the wars for Yugoslav heritage (1991-2001), which include four major conflicts during the 1990s: the war in Slovenia (June 27 - July 6, 1991), the war in Croatia (1991 - 1995), the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992 - 1995) during which the conflict between Bosniak and Croat military formations took place (1992 - 1994), and the Kosovo War (1998-1999), which ended with the NATO bombing of Serbia. Some add two more conflicts to this list, the Preševsko conflict (1999-2001) and the war in Macedonia (2001).

However, there is another story that is far less known: The story about the resistance to war, which existed with varying intensity in all parts of what we now call the post-Yugoslav space. In order to tell it correctly, it is necessary to shift the focus from the elites and ethnicity to include parts of the history of socialist Yugoslavia, both its achievements and limitations. This history has to include the development of activist networks (student, feminist, ecological, etc.) that started to emerge in Yugoslavia during the 1960s, the student protests of 1968 which strengthened the idea of civil participation in the political life of Yugoslavia, and especially the penetration of the second wave of feminism during the 1970s followed by the intense development of feminist groups during the 1980s. During the 1990s, this activist engagement was transformed into various forms of resistance, first against the preparation for war and then against its expansion and escalation. Although this resistance should be seen in a broader context and in interaction with other actions and initiatives in the Yugoslav space, in Serbia it was primarily expressed in support of two causes that did not necessarily overlap, nor were they unambiguous: first - as resistance to the futility of war, crimes and persecution of people; the second - as resistance to Milošević's wartime regime. The backbone of peace activism during the 1990s were women, and feminist activists were its most active part.

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This is hardly surprising considering that, at the beginning of the Yugoslav wars, there were already a significant number of experienced activists who had been hardened in the 1980s along with an established network of women's groups (mainly) in Belgrade that specialized in various types of activities: feminist education, SOS telephones, protection of women and girls, domestic violence, etc. On the other hand, in Yugoslav society by the end of the 1980s, the struggle over reproductive rights and questioning the level of women's emancipation was intensifying. During these societal debates, the nationalist parts of the intellectual elite dictated the general tone. This was accepted by many, including significant segments of the regime. The nationalist mobilization that was starting to take place also contained a gender dimension. While all the emancipatory achievements of socialism, including those concerning the position of women in society, were declared anachronistic and "anti-Serb", a return to supposedly traditional gender roles and a "demographic renewal" of the threatened nation were demanded. With the family as a metonymic image of the nation, women, reduced to the roles of mothers, wives and victims, became both a symbol of the suffering of (ethno)nationalist collectivity and a mechanism for its maintenance (or destruction). Hence, the prevalence of the most brutal forms of sexual abuse during the Yugoslav wars, regardless of whether it was carried out by individuals at their own initiative, or whether it was part of organized

violence that enjoyed the (tacit) support of commanding officers.

For many of the activists, opposition to war and nationalism was a logical continuation of their feminist engagement. For others, the frenzy of the conflict was the initial spark that led them to become more involved in the resistance to the war. Thus, *the Women's Parliament*<sup>1</sup> was created on March 8, 1991 by *the Belgrade Women's Lobby*.<sup>2</sup> The Women's Party<sup>3</sup> (ŽEST) and the feminist group *Women and society*<sup>4</sup> were formed as a reaction to the almost complete absence of women in Parliament after the first multi-party elections in December 1990. This was followed shortly thereafter by the creation of one of the initiators of the first anti-war organization in Serbia - the *Center for Anti-War Action*<sup>5</sup> (CAA). CAA, founded on July 15, 1991, also organized the first anti-war protests in Belgrade, the "Peace Walk" around the Assembly of Yugoslavia at the end of July. In the coming months and years, many other peace organizations and initiatives grew from the Center for Anti-War Action (such as the Civil Resistance Movement, Women in Black, Civic Action for Peace, Committee for Dubrovnik, Belgrade Circle, Igman Initiative, Live in Sarajevo, Center for Cultural Decontamination, Humanitarian Law Centre, Group 484, JUKOM and many others).

1 T/N: Ženski parlament

2 T/N: Beogradski ženski lobi

3 T/N: Ženska stranka

4 T/N: Žena i društvo

5 T/N: Centar za antiratnu akciju

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As the conflict escalated, thematically diverse women's groups directed most of their energy and resources towards anti-war actions and activities, organizing aid to refugees (a significant segment of whom were women and children), as well as to those seeking to avoid the draft. Feminist activists also participated as individuals in most anti-war groups and various peace (anti-war) actions and events. In Pionirski Park on October 5, 1991, in a display of solidarity between citizens of Belgrade and citizens of Dubrovnik entitled "Stop the hatred to stop the war", an end to the siege of Dubrovnik and the blockade of the city was demanded. From October 8, 1991 to February 8, 1992, thousands of people lit candles every evening in front of the Presidency of Serbia under the slogans "Solidarity with all rebels against the war" and "For all those killed in the war". From October 9, 1991 to 1996, every Wednesday, standing in silence, the *Women in Black* protested against war, ethnic cleansing and violence, chauvinism, hatred and xenophobia. From October 1991 to January 1992, anti-war rallies were held every week in the "Duško Radović" theater, under the name "Belgrade Anti-War Marathon." With the escalation of the war and its spread to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, anti-war events multiplied. Various public events were organized on the streets and squares during 1992, where the number of participants ranged from only a few dozen to several tens of thousands. These include the protest against the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina "Peace in Bosnia" (April 10), the peace concert "Don't count on us" (April 22), "Artists against the war" when several hundred drama artists protested against the war and expressed sympathy for its victims with a one-hour silence in front of the Yugoslav Drama Theater (May 30), "Crni flor" on the occasion of the destruction of Sarajevo (May 31), "Poslednje zvono" protest against the war policy of the regime (June 15), the "Path of Peace" march through the streets of Belgrade as part of anti-regime student demonstrations in cooperation with the CAA (June 30), and the "Yellow Ribbon" protest against the policy of ethnic cleansing (July 15), just to name a few.

Feminist resistance in the 1990s was continuous, took different forms and took place in different places, corresponding to changes in the social and political context. It brought the topic of war, violence and militarization of society into public discourse, problematizing the appearance of consent for waging a war imposed by the regime, running directly contrary to it. Opposing the nationalist narrative about the organically understood *Serbian people* as constant victims of the Others, feminist activists gave voice and sought justice for those victimized by Serbian nationalism. Contrary to the glorification of war and the valorization of violence coming from the majority of the media and political officials, they spoke of the consequences of war and violence on those who survived it or witnessed it, but also on society as a whole.

Today, more than thirty years after the beginning of the wars in Yugoslavia, although still insufficiently known to the general public, the legacy of feminist anti-war activism is ever present. Traces of it can also be found in international documents such as the adoption of UN Resolution 1325 on *Women, Peace and Security* in 2000 and international legal regulations. Sexual slavery and torture during the war were recognized as a crime against humanity, primarily thanks to the joint effort of feminist groups from the (post)Yugoslav space. The legacy of these groups can also be seen in the insistence on tackling the question of how we relate to the 1990s, the problematization of dominant nationalist narratives and the discourse of national martyrdom, and the constant reminder of those whose suffering is erased, not counted and/or not worth remembering in the ruling order of memory. As in the 1990s, feminist activism today brings all these issues back to the field of politics and political decisions, issues of elite and societal power and responsibility in the past, as well as the present. Its role is to constantly remind that the choice of what and how societies remember not only reflects the present day, but also represents a political choice for a possible future. ■■■

# the media: from tools of war to vehicles of denial

Dinko Gruhonjić

In Yugoslavia, the state media played a malign role in creating an atmosphere of inter-ethnic hatred and preparation for war. Public broadcasters, as well as state and private media, continue to play that role in the post-Yugoslav region, with a few honorable exceptions. Just as in the late 1980s and early 1990s they incited war, today they are working to maintain a state of frozen conflict and create tensions. In order to understand this phenomenon, we must go back to the (pre)war past. That is because the killing first began with words and images, and only then with weapons.

In the post-Yugoslav region, no one was held accountable for the war-mongering propaganda they willingly and fervently participated in – not media directors, not editors nor journalists. No one was prosecuted except the leader of the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS) from Belgrade, Vojislav Šešelj, who was sentenced to 10 years in prison before the Hague Tribunal for spreading warmongering hate speech against Croats from Vojvodina. Šešelj's rhetoric had fatal consequences: citizens of Croatian nationality were indeed expelled by use of violence and killings, with Šešelj's radicals taking part.

In the words of the Sarajevo author Bora Kontić, those were the «years that were eaten by lions», not only in the criminal and legal sense, but in the moral sense. The process of lustration has not been carried out in any of the states established with the murder of Yugoslavia, in spite of repeated promises. This has enabled prominent warmongering propagandists not only to avoid social condemnation, but to fully return to important positions in the media. An illustrative example is Milorad Vučelić, who serves today as editor-in-chief of the daily *Večernje Novosti* from Belgrade and owns the weekly *Pečat*, an ardent nationalist and pro-Putin outlet.

From 1991 to 1992, Vučelić was the general director of Radio-Television Novi Sad, which was the vanguard of war-mongering propaganda in Serbia. The rationale was simple: media preparation for the destruction of Vukovar in the fall of 1991, as well as for the aggression against Slavonia, Baranja and western Srem in Croatia. Vojvodina is geographically closest to those parts of Croatia (the distance between Novi Sad, the capital of Vojvodina, and Vukovar is about 80 kilometers), where the Novi Sad Corps of the staunchly pro-Serbian Yugoslav People's Army was stationed, which was responsible for the destruction of Vukovar and eastern parts of Croatia.



Vučelić was rewarded for his work at RTV Novi Sad. In 1992, he was appointed general director of Radio Television Serbia, where he remained until 1995. Slobodan Milošević personally removed him from that position because Vučelić was part of the “war hawks” within the ruling Socialist Party of Serbia. In Vučelić’s own words, he was dismissed “due to fundamental differences in views on the defense of national interests”. That is, because of his opposition to the preparations for signing the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995.

In 2017, the authoritarian Serbian leader Aleksandar Vučić rewarded Vučelić with the position of editor-in-chief of “Večernje Novosti”. Vučić and Vučelić were on the same side during the war years. Vučić himself was a high-ranking official of Šešelj’s SRS and the Minister of Information from 1998 to 2000, when he introduced and implemented the infamous Law on Information, known for draconian punishments for independent media as well as closing down the editorial offices of daily newspapers *Dnevni Telegraph*, *Naša Borba*, as well as the weekly *Evropljanin*. During Vučić’s term in office, in April 1999, the owner of *Dnevni Telegraph* and *Evropljanin*, journalist Slavko Ćuruvija, was murdered. The fact that Vučić is an all-powerful political figure in Serbia today is the best illustration of the lack of moral responsibility in Serbia for waging as many as four wars during the last decade of the 20th century.

The case of RTV Pink owner Željko Mitrović is also paradigmatic. Mitrović was very close to Mirjana Marković, the wife of Slobodan Milošević. Thanks to such strong connections, Mitrović founded TV Pink in 1994. On the order of Mirjana Marković, the state Radio and Television of Serbia made its resources available to it. TV Pink had the task of offering the citizens of Serbia - who were fed up with war, hyperinflation and abject poverty - a surrogate for the unbearable reality in which they lived. TV Pink fully fulfilled its task through a programming scheme that promoted turbo-folk, war criminals, as well as Latin American soap operas.

After the fall of Milošević’s regime, on October 5, 2000, the liberal public expected that, together with the regime, TV Pink would also be left behind. This did not happen, however, and Željko Mitrović managed to come to an agreement with the new authorities, which overthrew Milošević’s regime. That allowed him to continue expanding TV Pink throughout the region and create a real media empire. Today, that empire has continued to promote the same values it did during the Milošević regime: war criminals and turbo-folk, while also adding scandalous reality shows. The TV Pink information program remained strongly propagandistic in favor of the government, and today Aleksandar Vučić likes making appearances on the channel.

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In mid-2009, the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia (NUNS) submitted a criminal complaint to the domestic War Crimes Prosecutor's Office against those responsible in the media for war-mongering reporting, and incitement to war crimes during the wars. There were no indictments as a result of that report, only a book - «Words and Deeds – Calling for or Inciting War Crimes in the Media in Serbia in 1991-1992», edited by the then Deputy War Crimes Prosecutor Bruno Vekarić.

I am talking mostly about the situation in Serbia because I live there and know the situation best. I am also guided by the principle that one must first clean up in front of their own doorstep. Unfortunately, the situation is not much better in neighboring Croatia either. One of the editors of the cult Croatian anti-war weekly *Feral Tribune* from Split, the late Predrag Lucić, when asked how it is possible that warmongers are still present in the Croatian media, said that “[...] Many candidates for that list and for the Hague are still in editorial positions, or languishing in some *sinecure*, but for the most part, they haven't lost anything, neither their power, nor, unfortunately, any public reputation among part of the Croatian public. They are still the paradigm of patriotic journalism. It is a journalism that lies pathologically, thinking that it benefits the motherland.”

For example, there is the case of Smiljko Šagolje, a former TV Sarajevo journalist, who turned into an extreme Croatian warmonger during the war. He then went on to teach journalism at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Mostar. Or the case of Veseljko Koprivica from Montenegro, who, after writing about the responsibility of the former director of the Radio Television of Montenegro, Božidar Čolović, was convicted of causing this warmonger «mental distress due to injury to his honor and reputation».

Just as politicians and parties from the 1990s remained in power, the same is true for journalists. Again in the words of Predrag Lucić, «this has been operating since the beginning of the 1990s. They supported each other and had each other's backs. It's a symbiosis. If one flies away, the others will follow suit».

They did not fly away, as we saw with the example of Aleksandar Vučić. Or HDZ in Croatia. Or nationalist parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina. None of them expressed even a modicum of remorse for participating in preparing and waging wars, and the election results support the thesis that societies in the post-Yugoslav region still (mostly) support nationalist policies, with the help of the media that promote them.

Meanwhile, another phenomenon appeared in Serbia: daily tabloids. Or rather, tabloids that are not really tabloids. Serbian tabloids deal with «life and death» topics, they write extensively and at length about politics and war crimes, which was never a characteristic of tabloids. Those «real» tabloids deal with crime, show business, and celebrity sex scandals. Their goal has always been to have as large a circulation as possible in order to attract advertisers, and not to be taken seriously by the audience. These domestic «mutants», however, have the undisguised intention of being creators of public opinion. They are involved in the war in Ukraine by cheering for the Russian aggressors, they are also involved in targeting dissidents in Serbia, and in particular, they are involved in disrupting relations with neighboring countries. To this end, they receive all the help they need from the authorities, since they serve as a megaphone for them.

All of these media outlets promote historical revisionism, deny Serbia's responsibility for the wars during the killing of Yugoslavia, and insult neighboring nations: Croats are «Ustasha», Albanians from Kosovo are «Shiptars», Bosniaks are «Turks» and «Balijas», Montenegrins are «bastards», etc. The image of the West was also copied from Milosevic's time. The dominant narrative is that the USA, the EU, The Hague, NATO, *et al* constantly work against us, because we are “special”. NATO bombed us “unprovoked” in 1999. It's as if history before that year doesn't exist; As if Milošević's regime is not responsible for the expulsion of almost a million Kosovo Albanians, for mass graves in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, for ethnic cleansing, organizing concentration camps, mass rapes and finally the genocide in Srebrenica.

Today, these media outlets serve not only to “brainwash” the citizens of Serbia, but are also a propaganda tool used by Serbia to spread its “soft power”, mostly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, where they can also be watched and read. This is all in accordance with the ideological platform of the “Serbian world”, which is another name for the territorial-hegemonic project of “Greater Serbia” whose advocates in the 1990s were Vojislav Šešelj, the spokesman of the Milošević regime, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Serbian Academy of Art and Science, and nationalist intellectuals, among others.

These media outlets produce catastrophic consequences, but - as in the wartime 1990s - they are not the only ones. A whole system stands behind the ruling revisionist narrative of denying the recent past and mythologizing the entire history: from politicians (not only from the government but also from a substantial portion of the opposition), through the education system, to the media. The results are devastating: piles of murals and graffiti in honor of war criminal Ratko Mladić in Belgrade, humiliation of war crime victims, glorification of Putin’s crimes in Ukraine, xenophobia towards migrants, hatred towards the West, etc. In short, it is a system that has led to a part of the citizens no longer having the ability to distinguish good from evil. In this way, the media continues to contribute to the moral idiotization of society. The honorable journalistic exceptions, it seems, are fewer today than «back then». ■■■

# efforts to deconstruct the hateful narratives

Aleksandra Bosnić Đurić

The current states of the Western Balkans (with the exception of Albania) were created as a direct result of the disintegration of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ). This is important to emphasize because this process was, *par excellence*, motivated by nationalism, i.e., the intention of each nation to create its own, independent state. At the end of that process, states ended up basing their internal homogenization almost exclusively on nationalism which, by its nature, is sensitive and resistant to any manifestations of heterogeneity within its own framework. Since they based their identities on the preconceived idea of the nation-state, as an action program of sorts, these new creations have had to deal with the lack of an important social dimension in which different actors spontaneously harmonize their interests, and in this way, through compromise, constitute the social order from below.

This frustration with the impossibility of finding a homogeneous and “stable” political expression manifests itself most often in the form of a double antagonism - towards internal and external enemies. The category of internal enemies includes all those social groups that do not belong to the majority national corpus, such as national minorities, political minorities, sexual minorities, and migrants. Although these are minorities that, fragmented and marginalized, cannot threaten the majority reproduction of social and political life, they are persistently targeted as a disruptive factor because of the fact that their authentic existence challenges the unquestionable nation-state monolith.

On the other hand, the role of external enemy is most often ascribed to neighboring countries. Antagonism towards external enemies is mainly based on the premise of inadequate (“unnatural” and “unjust”) borders. Border disputes are present in practically all Western Balkans countries - Croatia and Slovenia dispute the border in the Gulf of Piran, Serbia and Croatia dispute the border on the Danube, Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina are seeking the formation of a third national entity, Republika Srpska is constantly questioning the existence of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia does not recognize the independence (and therefore the borders) of Kosovo and it views the independence of Montenegro with greater or lesser disapproval, whereas Macedonia is in a permanent cultural-identity dispute with Bulgaria and Greece, etc.

Naturally, border disputes are merely hypertrophied surface irritations under which deep historical, political, cultural and, in most cases, tragic war traumas are hidden. General disagreement about borders is simply a manifestation of disagreement about the past. Differing perceptions of the past is the defining characteristic of the narratives constructed in the public sphere in all the countries of the Western Balkans. In this sense, there is a pluriverse of narratives, several different interpretations of the (common) past projected onto the present, which strongly shape the consciousness of citizens and determine the agendas of institutions in each of the Balkan state entities. These narratives are fixed on binary codes such as: “we” - “them”, “ours” - “theirs”, “victims” - “aggressors”, and they become instruments in the construction of “reality”.

In this way, these narrative constellations create extreme relational processes that are characterized by hate speech and constantly evoke nostalgia for the (real) front.

It is also significant that populist styles of governance are in power in practically all states of the region, spreading this narrative through channels of state-ideological apparatuses (state and parastate media, educational systems, cultural institutions), even though the law prohibits it in all states, thereby creating unanimous support for their policies.

In this context, in the absence of any will on the part of state structures for an impartial confrontation with the past, the (thankless) role of deconstructing and neutralizing hateful narratives belongs to independent media and independent cultural institutions, alternative cultural centers, civil society organizations and enthusiastic individuals.

Based on the available data on their engagement and work, their initiatives encountered a double resistance. First, that induced by the ruling political elites, and secondly by the homogenized nationalist populace who stigmatize them either as “traitors” (in one’s own cultural space), or as “external enemies” (in neighbours’ social and cultural space). Thus, efforts to deconstruct hate narratives in the region found themselves in the position of being subjected to hate speech and never fully managed to transform the ideological matrices of nationalism.

When it comes to Serbia, the problem has become even more complicated since 2012. In addition to its declared orientation towards European integration, the official political and cultural strategies have been dominantly directed towards the cultivation of well-known nationalist codes. The memory culture, apart from occasional incidents, was aimed exclusively at the suffering of the Serbian people. Unfortunately, the renewed dream of a unified Serbia, manifested in the ideological construct of the “Serbian world”, has, in keeping with the principle of action and reaction, made it even more difficult to resolve the narrative of hatred and conflict relations in the Western Balkans.

The work of independent media and independent cultural institutions continues in a social climate saturated with tensions and hints of new open conflicts. Some of the most striking attempts to overcome mutually confrontational and oppressive

political formulas in the regional media scene include *Peščanik*, *Vreme* and *Autonomija* (Serbia); *Al Jazeera*, *Tačno.net*, *Buka*, *Nomad.ba* (BiH); *Feral Tribune* (formerly) and *Novosti*, *Lupiga.com* (Croatia); *Monitor* and *Pobjeda’s* culture supplement *Kult* (Montenegro). *Radio Free Europe* has programming in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Kosovo and North Macedonia. Additionally, N1 television is a media outlet that respects the journalistic code, which implies a certain level of professionalism and independence, although using the term “independent” for corporate media is questionable.

“Given that they belong to a region that emerged out of a terrible wartime turbulence not so long ago”, says journalist Nedim Sejdinović, “local societies are very sensitive to coverage of the crimes committed in their name during the 1990s. Journalists who nevertheless dare to deal with these topics are exposed to fierce pressure and, as a rule, are declared traitors. In most local societies, the discussion about the 1990s has been almost completely silenced in the past decade. Parallel to that, as expected, the level of inter-ethnic hatred is growing. In this sense, it can be said that the media in the region - apart from a few exceptions - do not perform an important social function”.

For two decades now, the same stigma of “traitor” has been applied to the small number of independent cultural institutions, as well as artists and cultural workers, who have recognized facing the past and the deconstruction of hate narratives in the region as their professional and personal mission. Their work is spatially limited to free zones in cities, which is reminiscent of “ghetto sites” that existed in the 1990s (like the Center for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade or the Black House in Novi Sad). In September 2022, a positive example when it comes to state cultural institutions engaging with memory culture took place in Novi Sad. Based on a script by Darko Cvijetić (a writer from Bosnia and Herzegovina) and directed by the Serbian director Kokan Mladenović, the play “Why do you sleep on the floor!” was premiered in a triple co-production between the National Theater in Sarajevo, the Serbian National Theater in Novi Sad and the Gavella Drama Theater in Zagreb. The play focuses on “dramatic and painful events from the beginning of the war”, but it

1 T/N: *Zašto na podu spavaš*



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is also contextualized in the present time. In 2022, projects dealing with memory culture could also be seen within the framework of the European Capital of Culture 2022, although they are in contradiction with the mainstream of Serbian and Vojvodina culture.

However, despite certain incidents and cathartic moments, the authors of some of the most significant works on facing the past were themselves subjected to hate speech and stigmatization. The list of those who have experienced this includes Viktor Ivančić (after the publication of the photo monograph “Behind seven camps - from a crime of culture to the culture of crime”, which was published by Forum ZFD Belgrade); the author of the documentary film “Srbenka”, Nebojša Slijepčević; author of the documentary film “Dubina dva” Ognjen Glavonić; the author of the play

“Srebrenica. Kad mi ubijeni ustanemo”, Zlatko Paković (performed under the auspices of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia); the director of the film “Quo vadis, Aida” Jasmila Žbanić, and many others. In a conversation with Jelena Diković, when asked if there is hope that there will ever be reconciliation in this region, Viktor Ivančić answered: “There is no facing the past. These countries are communities of martyrs, where everyone tells their own martyr's story”.

This statement about the parallelism of autarkic worlds, radically irreducible to a common political and cultural denominator, is perhaps the most accurate diagnosis of the situation in Western Balkans countries when it comes to seemingly quixotic efforts to finally step out of the past together, leaving hateful narratives behind. ■■■

# the war in the classrooms

Srđan Milošević, Aleksandar R. Miletić

Teaching history is a *serious business*. It is challenging both in terms of its form and from a material perspective, but the ultimate requirement is to work out a system which would ensure a lasting impact, create positive knowledge, and develop apparatus for critical thinking. In this context, the content of historical realities should be carefully tailored for educational purposes to fit the age of the students, considering their psychological and emotional development.

We offer a broad insight into the topic of how the war of the 1990s in Yugoslavia is taught in Serbian history textbooks, emphasizing the dominant tone that prevails in the consulted manuals. The many history textbooks that we consulted (more than a dozen) serve as the sample for the following conclusions, without necessarily specifying authors or publishers.

The overture for the wars was, of course, the political situation in Yugoslavia in the late 1980s, and even before this last Yugoslav decade. Among the issues encountered by the Yugoslav state, the authors point out the detrimental nature of Croatian and Albanian nationalism that became evident in episodes of Maspok in Croatia (1971) and violent demonstrations in Kosovo (1968 and 1981). In line with the general lack of self-critical reflection, the perils of Serbian nationalism are not mentioned at all – not a single word. Nationalism is harbored by the others: “we” have “identity”, “legitimate interests” and “concerns”. Presupposed anti-Serbian intentions of Tito’s regime often underlie textbooks’ rationales in addressing key problems of the Yugoslav state.

The “war of the 1990s” section of these textbooks usually consists of several paragraphs, which rarely indicate, at least superficially, the complexity of the historical experience. Much less do they describe the responsibility of the Serbian side in the crisis and war. Almost all the consulted textbooks provide ethnocentric and monocausal interpretations of the outbreak of the interethnic conflicts during the Yugoslav wars. In Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), the wars were supposedly triggered by the proclamations of independence by those republics. According to Serbian textbooks, what characterized the politics of Croatia at the time was the degradation of ethnic Serbs to the status of ethnic minority and the evocation of gruesome memories of the Croatian Ustasha regime. In BiH, the problem was that the independence was proclaimed by ethnic Croats and Muslims/Bosniaks against “legitimate” Serbian aspirations to remain in Yugoslavia. The case of the Kosovo conflict is explained solely by the increased activities of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). There are no attempts to provide a broader interpretative framework or to take into account a more complex analysis of the genesis of the Croatian, Bosnian, and Kosovo crises. This approach is epitomized by the following reasoning (which serves here only to illustrate the pattern): “When Croatia and Slovenia decided to leave Yugoslavia, the war was inevitable”, claim the authors of one of the textbooks. Why so?

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When it comes to the actual responsibility for war crimes there is a striking difference between addressing this issue with regard to Kosovo and with regard to Croatia and BiH. The interpretation of the violations of humanitarian law in the Kosovo conflict follows the aforementioned one-sided approach. All the consulted textbooks provide detailed information on, and even photographs of, war crimes committed by NATO forces and KLA units against Serb civilians. Albanian civilian victims of war are only once mentioned, namely among casualties of the NATO bombing campaign. Violations of humanitarian law and war crimes committed by the Serbian army, police, and paramilitary forces, as well as the Serbian culpability for the mistreatment of the Albanian civilian population, are never pointed out.

As already mentioned, interpretation of the war crimes in Croatia and BiH provide a different general pattern. The textbooks tend to present what might be considered a shared responsibility by all the belligerents for the acts of ethnic cleansing and for the massacres committed against each other's civilian populations and prisoners of war. The particular case of Srebrenica is mentioned in some of the analyzed textbooks and avoided in others. Very few of them apply the term *genocide*

to describe the crime of the Republika Srpska Army in Srebrenica. If Srebrenica is mentioned at all, the authors admit responsibility of the Bosnian Serbs military, yet they challenge the official number of around 8,000 murdered prisoners and civilians. They attempt to counterbalance it by mentioning 3,500 Serbian casualties in Podrinje throughout the war. The ethnocentric perspective is rather obvious: while the Srebrenica statistics are presented as dubious, the number of Serbian victims in Podrinje is stated with absolute certainty.

Even if the term genocide is applied to describe the crime against the Bosniaks from Srebrenica it is consequently underlined in the textbooks that this qualification is determined by the ICTY. Emphasizing the role of the ICTY in deciding the case of the Srebrenica genocide serves to trigger doubts about the trustworthiness of that qualification, given the propaganda against the decisions of this court in Serbia. It should not pass unnoticed that it was ICTY that rendered the judgments about the Srebrenica genocide. On the other hand, one of the textbooks counterposes to those ICTY judgments the controversial work of the "international commission" of the "most distinguished experts in history, law, and forensics" who wrote a report "exceeding 1000 pages", concluding

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that what happened in Srebrenica in 1995 was not genocide, but a “war crime”. This very wording is utterly redolent. It clearly suggests which qualification is to be accepted if one chooses between the decisions of a constantly contested court or the commission of experts and their thousand page report.

While all the belligerents are blamed for acts of ethnic cleansing, the Croatian military operations Bljesak and Oluja are specifically noted. Other examples of similar crimes inflicted upon non-Serb population by the Serbian side are not mentioned at all.

When it comes to the so-called international community, there is only one affirmative reference: the EEC 1991 proposal for arbitration. All other depictions of the international community are negative in the extreme. In particular, Germany, the US, and the Vatican are blamed for an unprincipled and biased attitude during the crisis. According to the textbooks, the role of Germany in the diplomatic campaign for international recognition of Croatia and BiH was particularly sinister. US foreign policy is pointed to as a vanguard of military campaigns in former Yugoslavia and in Kosovo. The imposition of the economic embargo on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992 is explained in neutral terms by the belief of the international community that it (i.e. FRY) was responsible for the escalation of the war in BiH. However, the rationale includes an apologetic reference that Yugoslavia could not deny humanitarian aid for its co-nationals abroad, no matter the circumstances. This reference implies that Yugoslavia was punished for providing humanitarian aid for the Serbs living abroad. The harshest criticism of the “international

community” involvement, particularly the US intervention, in the Yugoslav crisis refers to the period of the Kosovo conflict. NATO intervention is condemned as a violation of international law and is regularly denoted as an act of aggression against FRY. Lacking any additional context (which would not necessarily justify the intervention itself) the NATO intervention appears in the textbooks as an act that has no explanation but the anti-Serb sentiments of NATO member states.

The authors of the textbooks unmistakably understand that history textbooks will be read within a specific and predefined context. That by itself creates an interpretative pattern for what they write. The textbook is not situated in a vacuum, deprived of values, ideologies, and prejudices. Thus, the authors of the textbook have to consider the educational aspect and be conscious of the outcomes of what they present to students: this outcome is either supportive of the commonly accepted and deeply rooted interpretations or challenging and critically oriented. The analysis of Serbian history textbooks shows that the majority of the authors consciously favor the former and carefully avoid the latter. In cognitive terms, the textbooks in Serbia are devoid of any hint of controversy or critical points of view. The only detailed explanatory notes that one finds are in the authors’ attempts to provide a rationale behind the actual, or supposed injustices inflicted upon Serbs. The content of the Serbian textbooks merely supports the *loci communes* of the popular “common knowledge” of the recent past and provides further justifications and legitimacy for simplified and biased ethnocentric interpretations. ■■■

# imposition of legal standards and their sustainability

Selma Korjenić, Ajna Mahmić

Although numerous court cases so far have confirmed the scale of the crimes committed on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1990s, it has become obvious that criminal justice alone is not able to respond to the needs of society, which must go through the process of facing the past for the sake of a sustainable peace. The absence of a much needed dialogue about the difficult recent past, and the systemic responses within BiH, as well as the region, have helped perpetuate conflicting war narratives in the public space. Instead of remembering and honoring all innocent victims, the war narratives focus on denying crimes and victims and glorifying war criminals throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region.

War crimes had been denied, and even spoken of with approval, in the past, but BiH society has been faced by this phenomenon more intensely in recent years. In addition to denying the genocide in Srebrenica, many other crimes are denied. The perpetrators are often glorified and celebrated in the public space. Denial and glorification is most often expressed in naming public institutions and streets after convicted war criminals, memorials, monuments, public justifications, the glorification of flags and symbols, murals of convicted war criminals, as well as the chanting of slogans that glorify massacres or their perpetrators at sporting events. These harmful practices are visible at commemorations and public gatherings, through the promotion of criminal ideology, historical revisionism and rehabilitation of controversial figures, as well as direct or indirect financial support to convicted war criminals and their families from public funds.

Manipulation of war narratives is often used as a political tool for shaping public opinion and continuously causes tensions in divided societies. This has the greatest impact on victims and their families, as well as the returnee population, especially that of the Republic of Srpska (the entity where denial and glorification is most pronounced), because it not only threatens their dignity and the memory of suffering, but is an additional trigger for the already difficult war trauma they carry with them. Those who experienced the war by surviving in enclaves such as Srebrenica and Žepa or cities under siege such as Sarajevo and Goražde, as well as other places throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, are affected by this as well.

Responding to constant demands that this phenomenon is addressed unambiguously, several initiatives were submitted between 2009 to 2019 at the state level to legally proscribe denying, minimizing, justifying or approving the Holocaust, war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity. Due to a lack of political will by representatives of political parties in the Parliament of BiH and within BiH institutions, these initiatives were unsuccessful.

Seeing the weaknesses within the BiH system, or more precisely the lack of consensus for the operation of BiH institutions, on this and other important issues of transitional justice, victims' representatives and other NGO actors tried to further involve the international community. While the EU had sent official messages which stated their position on the issue, the tone and substance were not forceful enough to precipitate any changes 'on the ground'. Victims' associations were

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particularly vocal, writing open letters to representatives of the EU and the international community, warning that despite the EU's position, the practice of negation and minimization continued in BiH.

Additionally, the topic of denial and glorification became prominent in reports sent to the international community by numerous NGOs. A few years ago, this was pointed out by numerous international actors, including the independent legal expert of the European Union, Reinhard Priebe, who, in a document entitled "Expert Report on Rule of Law issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina" drew attention to a number of deeply worrying deficiencies in the rule of law in BiH. The European Parliament rapporteur for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cristian Dan Preda, asked the European Commission what it intends to do in order to stop the genocide denial in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the glorification of war crimes in the Republic of Srpska.

This was soon followed by the Decision of the outgoing High Representative in BiH, Valentin Incko, at the end of July 2021, which imposed amendments to the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina ("Amendments to the Law"), which regulates the prohibition of denying, questioning and glorifying war crimes determined in court judgements.

The imposition of amendments to the Law caused fierce reactions within Bosnia and Herzegovina and throughout the region, ranging from positive reactions approving of the long-awaited move by the international community, to extremely negative ones, especially from the Republic of Srpska, which led to an official blockade of the work of BiH state institutions.

It did not take long after the imposition of amendments to the Law for the BiH public to ask the question - what do the new legal provisions actually prohibit, should they have been imposed, and how much can they influence the trend toward reducing denial?

It is important to note that the new amendments to the Law are ethnically neutral and apply to contesting all crimes established by final verdicts, as well as to glorifying convicted criminals. Looking at the language of the amendments, they seem comprehensive and define the actions and crimes that are considered to be negation. Thus, public approval, denial, downplaying or attempts at justification are defined as criminal actions, and crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes established by final verdicts are defined as subjects of the prohibition. However, the amendments to the Law leave room for doubts in ambiguously defined elements of the criminal offense and the direction of the act. Therefore, the basic question is whether these amendments to the Law are implementable functionally, i.e., is denial of the above enumerated forms of crime punishable in practice?

More than a year has passed since the amendments to the Law entered into force, and the Prosecutor's Office of BiH, which is responsible for the implementation of the Criminal Code of BiH, has not filed a single indictment regarding the denial of war crimes, despite the large number of criminal charges filed and over 40 cases established. One of the reasons for the still unestablished judicial practice regarding the denial of war crimes is the lack of evidence for the commission of a criminal

offense, and the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina has not yet received any reports submitted by police agencies. Therefore, the submitted applications are not supported by evidence, which hinders the process of launching investigations and bringing indictments.

Furthermore, although the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina undertook investigative actions in most of the cases on which it received a report, prosecutors believe that the provisions are not clear and they did not get the impression that "all the elements of the existence of a criminal offense were fulfilled in such a way that the court could sanction it, i.e., make a decision on someone's guilt"<sup>1</sup>.

Indeed, all current cases before the Prosecutor's Office of BiH will serve to establish court practice. Therefore, it is extremely important to pay special attention to the process of establishing this judicial practice so that, in the future, we have cases that will clearly and precisely dictate the conditions for establishing criminal liability. On the other hand, although it is crucial for the judicial authorities to proceed with prosecuting crime deniers, initially by bringing charges in those cases that fit the criteria, the generally accepted view is that hate speech, genocide denial and other war crimes have been less prominent in the public space since the imposition of the Amendments. Thus, the frequency of denial of the crime of genocide in the Republic of Srpska, where denial was the most prevalent, has been reduced by over 80 percent.

Amendments to the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina are an important step towards improving the rule of law and a useful way to affect changes in political and public discourse regarding the denial of court-established war crimes. Their existence and application can greatly contribute to bolstering the right to justice and truth and can play an important preventive role. Certain positive effects are already visible, but they are not expected to have a greater effect if specific application through indictments and trials does not begin soon.

Otherwise, the already difficult picture of the war past reflected in everyday life will continue to deepen the pain and suffering, especially of the victims who are most affected by this problem. Along with implementation of the Law, it is necessary to continue working in areas where these phenomena can already be overcome, such as making decisions in local communities about the names of streets, public institutions and other forms of memorialization in public space.

The responsibility in this regard also lies with the education system, the media, art and cultural institutions which have a strong potential to address difficult topics, as well as through the contributions of religious communities, and through frequent public dialogue on the topics of the war past, especially through networking actors and initiatives, cooperation and support in all areas of civil society. ■■■

### suggestions for further reading

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<sup>1</sup> Stated by Prosecutor Oleg Čavka in 2022.

# a critique of western-funded memorialization initiatives in the Balkans

Jasmin Mujanović

Memorialization, truth and reconciliation, dealing with the past - the dominant terminology has vacillated since the end of the wars in former Yugoslavia, but the basic concept has remained at the center of all major EU and U.S. initiatives in the Western Balkans. What must be done in order to allow for a collective process of addressing the facts of the conflicts and the atrocities committed during their conduct and to allow that process to inform future socio-political interactions between the publics and leaders of the post-Yugoslav states? No singular answer has ever been agreed upon, but tens of millions of dollars have likely been put forward by individual governments and the broader Euro-Atlantic community to realize a dizzying array of conferences, workshops, roundtables, seminars, summer programs, studies, policy reports, academic publications etc. since 2001.

Despite the resources invested, one would be hard pressed to conclude that any meaningful aspect of this idea of “dealing with the past” has been successfully implemented in the region. Why?

The primary reason for this generational failure concerns, first and foremost, an obvious error in how such initiatives have traditionally been conceived and, in turn, what their stated objectives have been. Namely, traditional attempts at “dealing with the past” in the Western Balkans since the end of the wars in former Yugoslavia have sought to depoliticize the process. That is, they have sought to marginalize the significance of the political machinations which informed the dissolution of Yugoslavia; the accompanying ideological narratives which justified and demanded systematic crimes against humanity to be

perpetrated; and, above all, the fashion in which these political-ideological programs have largely *survived* and *continued* into the post-war period.

In other words, one cannot deal with the past in the Western Balkans because it is not yet truly the past.

The most apparent proof of these facts is in the nature of the political regimes in the primary conflict sites in the region as they presently exist. In Serbia, whose war-time Milosevic regime was the architect of both the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the vast majority of the atrocities committed in the subsequent wars, the prevailing public conception of the period is one that can best be described as revisionist. There is no single aspect of the period in which a factual or historically informed perception prevails in mainstream Serbian society. The Serbian government today, moreover, is largely composed of former Milosevic era apparatchiks, whose own policies remain ideologically in line with the former dictator's priorities, albeit (usually) without explicit calls for violence. Serbian government officials do not accept the facts of any major atrocity committed by Serbian or Serbian proxy forces during the war, whether it is a question of the sack of Vukovar, the Siege of Sarajevo, the Srebrenica genocide, or the Račak massacre. In this, Serbian society remains definitively ensconced in the normative frameworks of the Milosevic era.

In Croatia, the nationalist HDZ has only ever lost two parliamentary elections since the country's independence. While Zagreb has successfully joined both the EU and NATO, its contemporary politics are almost entirely consumed with war-related

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matters, especially as far as its foreign policy is concerned. Zagreb remains categorically wedded to advancing the war-time aims of the Tudjman regime in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina, as PM Andrej Plenković made clear during a recent speech in the Croatian parliament in which he argued that there is an unbroken line of political continuation from Tudjman's tenure and Plenković's government strategic priorities. Similarly, the far-right has emerged as a major factor in Croatia's post-EU politics, which has meant an alarming uptick in Holocaust and World War II revisionism, as well as further retrenchment in the positions of Croatia's Serb community.

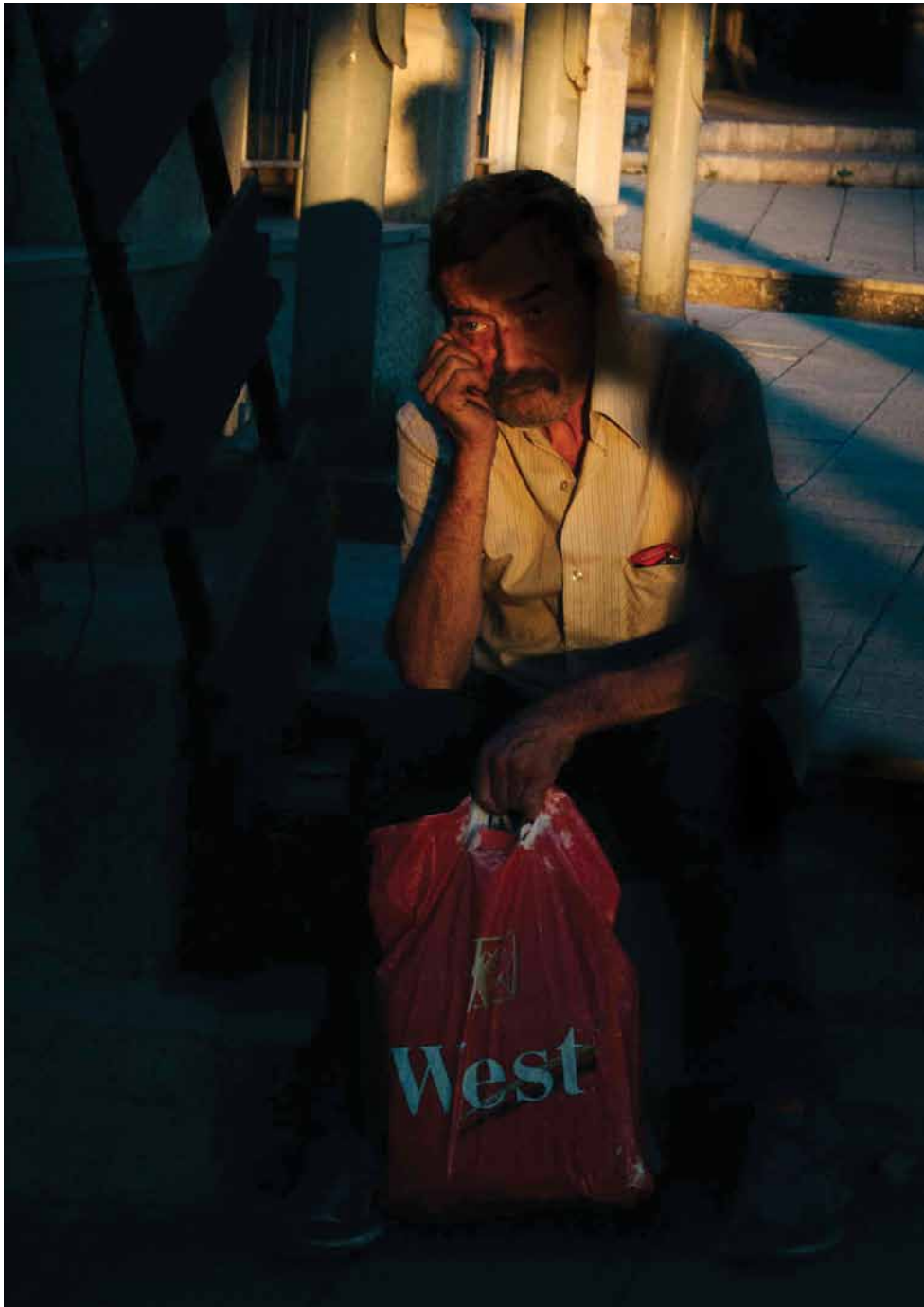
In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the state remains infamously trapped in the sectarian miasma of the Dayton constitutional order, nearly three decades since the conclusion of the Bosnian War. The most glaring and toxic manifestation of this phenomenon being not only the country's large-scale internal ethnic partition but the specific case of the Republika Srpska (RS) entity, whose origins are inseparably tied to the war-time Serb nationalist leadership and its avowedly genocidal intentions during the same period. The continued threats of secession, such as the categorical denial and even glorification of the Bosnian genocide by the leadership in Banja Luka (above all by the RS president Milorad Dodik), are a direct product of the Western decision to allow the continued existence of the RS after 1995. Unlike the "Herceg-Bosna" para-state, which was dissolved into the Federation entity, the RS was permitted to functionally continue its political existence after the Dayton Peace Agreement and, as such, the entity has served as the key platform for continued Serb nationalist threats against the Bosnian state and the whole of the Western Balkans' security and stability.

Tiny Kosovo, meanwhile, remains entirely dominated by the question of its international status and Serbia's categorical refusal to accept the country's independence and permit its integration into key international institutions. No less malign, however, is the continued obstinance of the EU's own five non-recognizers of Kosovo's sovereignty who, inadvertently or otherwise, buttress Belgrade's recalcitrancy while also empowering Russia's cynical manipulation of the Kosovo question in order to serve its own imperialist machinations in Ukraine (and also in Georgia and Moldova). In Kosovo, much as in Bosnia, the idea of dealing with the past is especially absurd, given that war-time ideological programs continue to absolutely dominate each of these countries' day-to-day politics.

Given this sordid reality, which can be readily demonstrated through even a cursory regional overview such as this one, what is to be done? How can foreign but also regional policymakers – the few so inclined – actually promote constructive engagement with the Western Balkans' fraught and painful histories?

It can only occur through centering political dialogue and political solutions. It is a fool's errand to expect entrenched nationalist and sectarian regimes to undermine the foundations of their own administration by allowing for a truthful and factual accounting of the past. As such, dealing with the past requires dealing with the present and that, in turn, means confronting and combating the authoritarian and sectarian tendencies of existing regimes in the Western Balkans.

Alas, the appetite for such a categorical reinvention of Western regional policy is clearly minimal. Even after Russia's 2022 (re)invasion of Ukraine, both the EU and U.S. have largely continued their accommodation of the Kremlin's regional satellites. In that sense, the West's approach to the Western Balkans remains *status quo ante bellum*. Until that changes, either through a modicum of proactive and strategic consideration by the West or through the necessity of responding to a further decline in regional stability and



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security (which appears almost certain given the current trajectory of regional politics) one cannot expect any novel or transformative developments concerning the process of facing the past. Mere biological transitions will do nothing, as we have already seen, as youth brought up and educated in authoritarian and sectarian societies will inevitably reproduce the perspectives and prejudices of their elders. A new view of one's society and region requires a degree of political and social emancipation. That is only possible through confrontation with the practices, institutions, and elites which stigmatize such initiatives in the first place.

Absent a genuine political turn in the Euro-Atlantic community's approach to the Western Balkans, the well-worn praxis of the past several decades will prevail: millions spent on ineffectual and irrelevant programs which exist only to produce cosmetic outcomes for donor states and organizations, while making no meaningful improvement in the lives of the citizens of the region whose welfare these projects are ostensibly primarily concerned with. All the while, the political dynamics in the region will continue to deteriorate still further, making any future genuine and credible attempts at addressing them all the more difficult. ■■

# the clash of the myths

Mirko Medenica

The role of myths has always been to inculcate the idea of connection and a common past in a group of individuals, thus bolstering the cohesiveness of the community. The origin of myths can generally be traced back to elites, as they are the ones who create, modify and adapt myths to their own interests. The character of myths also depends on elites and their intentions. Myths can have both a positive and a negative impact on society. The myth of “brotherhood and unity”, for example, turned out to be a bigger lie than we could have imagined. Nevertheless, the idea of that myth is positive, as ultimately it led to almost fifty years without war and the same number of years of social progress, which is no small feat. Myths that play a negative role can lead to disastrous consequences in some cases.

As a myth takes hold in society, it evolves into collective memory, i.e., how we as a community remember events from history. That memory should be connected with the individual memory, so to the extent that the collective memory coincides with the individual, the individual will feel part of the community.

In Serbia and the region, conflicting myths were created about what happened during the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Myths that justified, and mobilized society for war and violence are being revived in Serbia today. The elites in power have a great interest in imposing those narratives and imprinting them in the consciousness of the citizens. This interest is twofold. First, today’s political and economic elite participated in and contributed to the wars and they continue to draw their power in many ways from those years. Presenting these events as both inevitable and purposeful frees them from responsibility for the disaster they created. Additionally, the elites are motivated by techniques of governance and maintaining power. This requires the continuous production of tensions in order to divert attention from everyday problems - corruption, crime, poverty, bad management, environmental pollution.

In Serbia, denial of war crimes, glorification of war criminals, and nationalist rhetoric are all very effective means of producing tension and diverting attention from glaring inequality of all kinds. In order to soften the dissatisfaction with so much injustice, nationalism is offered up. Instead of correcting injustices, reducing poverty and economic and social inequalities, we “rally around the flag”.



In Croatia, after social progress in the years before joining the EU, the elites are returning to their previous positions. That policy is summed up in the theory of the former President of the Supreme Court of Croatia, Milan Vuković, that “defenders of a state that is a victim of aggression cannot commit war crimes”. The founding myth of the modern Croatian state is inextricably linked with the war of the 1990s. Hence the almost dogmatic attitude about the war. In combination with the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), which considers itself an inseparable part of the state because it led Croatia in the war, this all indicates that a more realistic view of the war past is less likely.

Today, Bosnia and Herzegovina represents a loose union of ethno-religious fiefdoms and for 30 years has been functioning on the basis of a peace treaty whose goal was to stop the war. No further steps have been taken to make Bosnia and Herzegovina into a functional state, and the country is, politically, still in the immediate post-war period. Instead of a civic state, BiH is a state of three nations, i.e., three ethno-religious political and economic elites that were formed during the war, whose grip on power is directly related to the maintenance of divisions and tensions.

Kosovo’s situation is specific because of its political position, in large part due to the so-called international community, constant obstructions by the Serbian authorities and somewhat unresolved status. For almost two decades since the war, Kosovo has been ruled by parties that grew out of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which have continued to apply many of their tactics from the war to their political opponents. The pressure of the international community has led to a unique case in the region - those in power brought about the legal framework based on which some of them are now being tried, as the highest-ranking war leaders of the KLA.

The process of facing the past is going astray today, and modest gains made after the war have largely been undone. This is not only a consequence of internal regional dynamics, but part of the general trend of rising extremist right-wing ideas and movements around the world. In this sense, this situation can be described as a joke about the slow process of joining the EU, “if we don’t want to join the EU, the EU will come to us”. Indeed, what we can hear today across the continent is eerily reminiscent of the speeches of regional politicians in the 1990s.

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When we talk about facing the past, the conclusion emerges that all previous strategies have failed and that we have not moved far from the *status quo* of the 1990s. In order to solve a problem, it is necessary to glean the motivations of those who create it, and those motivations are often skillfully hidden under layers of big words and ideological phrases. What motivates the authorities of the region to reach for nationalism and nationalist mythology today? The answer is not ideology, but one much more down-to-earth – maintaining the privileges and status of political and economic elites.

Serbia, like other countries in the region, is characterized by great injustice, and the foundations of that injustice lie in the 1990s. Today's crime, corruption, state capture are all merely an upgrade. By normalizing the most serious war crimes, society becomes less sensitive to every other form of crime. What is the problem if someone is corrupt, when it is not a problem if they are responsible for the deaths of hundreds or thousands of people?

Facing the past should not be seen as an isolated issue reduced to criminal, legal or moral aspects. The official mythology is obviously resistant to such arguments. What may be its weak point is pointing out the connection between the bad quality of life in the present and the wartime past.

The question is what to do with that past and how it can be reinterpreted. How do we view the past, what kind of narratives or even myths should we create so that they have positive effects on society?

The countries of the region in the post-war period are societies with collapsed basic social values, morals, empathy and solidarity, which all make up the foundations of a decent society. Does facing the past, as an important factor in healing, come before or after the recovery of a society? Is it a condition for recovery? Of course it is, but these processes can only happen in parallel.

During my career, I have spoken to hundreds of people who have had a close family member killed in war. When I learned from the conversation that the victim voluntarily joined the army and asked why, I would very rarely get an answer that coincided with the official narrative about defending the people and patriotic motives. The fallen soldiers are now being canonized, seemingly generously, with the authorities furnishing them with heroes' wreaths, but corruption is what is actually behind this, as the authorities want to deflect responsibility - heroism implies voluntarism, but there was nothing voluntary in the suffering of these people.

Stories of heroism, the despicable exploitation of civilian victims, constitute a culture or cult of death, which should be opposed by a culture of life. The cult of death leads to the abolition of empathy, human and social anesthetization, because if human life is not valuable, factories, jobs, forests, rivers, public spaces are even less valuable.

When I talk about the culture of life, I don't mean a superficial celebration of life, but a painful confrontation with the fact that ordinary people have died, that it could have been any of us, that no one asked them if they wanted to participate in a war which contained nothing good, useful or glorious. Our focus should be on the victims, on their lives, fears, traumas, devoid of nationalistic mythology. There is probably nothing that can ease the pain and provide comfort to the families of the victims. But at the level of society, the suffering of soldiers and civilians, their memory, can have meaning, can be cathartic, but only if the message is: "Never again!"

Instead of heroism and mythologization, the focus should be on ordinary life stories. Instead of numbers, we need the names of real people, with all their virtues, faults, anxieties, which we can all empathize with. Making sense of the myth of heroism is not taking away the dignity of victims. On the contrary, by insisting that they are victims, they are remembered in a dignified way, because that is what they were - victims.

By demystifying the war and directly connecting the war with the everyday problems of citizens, the position of the political and economic elites can be weakened, and the status quo can be undermined. Currently, the victims of harmful policies are standing in defense of those who implemented those policies in the 1990s, and are still implementing them today. The fact should be brought to light that those who are responsible for the anxieties of everyday life are among us, that they are the ones in power, that they are the ones who tell us that our problems come from outside, from our neighbors. In the spirit of Marxist theory, the only “war” or conflict that makes sense is class conflict. On that idea, we need to realize that those who have been presented as our enemies for years are actually our allies, and those who present themselves as our “protectors” are actually our enemies.

The countries of the region, like the rest of Europe and the world, are under increasing pressure from common, global problems. Anxieties, uncertainty and fears pile up, and some kind of discharge of this accumulated energy is inevitable. The only question is where this energy will be directed, either to new senseless wars or toward building a different world, a society for all. This is the fight that lies ahead and the wider context in which the fate of the states of our region will be decided. The issue of redefining the past will be dealt with from within that framework, as an integral part of it, not as an issue separate from others.

It is up to us to learn from the past. The wars are over, time cannot be turned back and sacrifices can never be recovered. Our responsibility is to make the memory of that past useful for the future, not a burden and an obstacle to a dignified life. ■■

# on populism and historical revisionism

Thomas Schad

Populism and historical revisionism were among the driving forces behind the wars of the 1990s in former Yugoslavia. This context has been meticulously studied by scholars from different disciplines and countries. Nebojša Popov's edition *The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis* (1996) is one of the most important collections on the topic. Yet, the insinuated catharsis remains the key challenge: given today's rampant revival of revisionist populism worldwide, it is fair to ask which lessons can be drawn from the (post-)Yugoslav experience. For this purpose, a collective of post-Yugoslav and EU-historians came together in the public history project *Histoire pour la liberté*. Throughout 2021, this EU-funded project enabled a series of lectures and public debates in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Germany. In the following, I will lay out some of the most central questions discussed during the program in order to finally readdress the question of how and why we should learn from the 1990s.

The first event of the program at Kloifest Zagreb (May 2021), entitled "Against historical revisionism, for the revision of historical cognition", was focused on discussing the most important differences between *revision* and *revisionism*. Most crucial for this distinction is the way in which historical facts are treated: historians committed to scientific methods strive for *fact-based consent*, which may also involve controversial debates, but ultimately aspire to obtain scholarly consent. Populist revisionists, on the other hand, will (ab)use historical facts selectively, to the extent that they match their 'therapeutic purposes'. Unwanted facts will be sacrificed and evicted – while values and emotions are given priority. When populists abuse history, their goal is not truth in a scientific sense: They rather want to make "people feel good", as Dubravka Stojanović from Belgrade put it.

*Significance-driven revision* of an established view of history can be induced, for instance, by major global changes. One example of how our (re)vision of the geopolitical world changes the way historiography is written is the cognition of methodological nationalism and its shortcomings which will, first and foremost, see facts *within* nation states. Other, global developments, may (inadvertently) be undervalued.

In that sense, globalization offers new prospects while at the same time, it also brings new challenges. One of these challenges, the correlation between “new” cross-border rapprochements and new divisions and conflicts, was discussed at the History Fest Sarajevo (June 2021). The troubles around the intensified Serbian-Russian relations in the context of Russian warfare, evoking the myth of age-old brotherhood, have become commonplace. Some similar phenomena are less known, like the Greek-Serbian discourse of friendship in the 1990s.

Another imported tension unfolded in early 2018, when the Bosnian capital Sarajevo “canceled” Turkish Nobelist Orhan Pamuk. Given that Pamuk openly and repeatedly recognized the Armenian genocide (anathema to Turkey’s populist AKP government), Sarajevo’s plans to award Pamuk honorary citizen enraged the revisionist Turkish regime. Leveraging its close ties to Sarajevo’s city administration at the time, Pamuk was publicly disinvited.<sup>1</sup> In this case, illiberal town twinnings and party-networks between BiH and Turkey channeled the obvious exploitation of historical topics for populist purposes. All of the aforementioned, revisionist cases share a dynamic in which history is abused as a populist, illiberal asset.

Orhan Pamuk’s case also points to the conflictual relationship between historiography, formal politics, and fictional writing. Under the motto “Historians for peace”, these questions were discussed by the historians of the program *Histoire pour la liberté*, novelists and some political actors at Belgrade’s 13th KROKODIL festival (August 2021). Whereas fiction genuinely builds upon the use of emotions and creative *bricolage*, in historiography, emotions are merely treated as analytical units. Partisan selectivity, often ascribed to

emotional affinity, must be avoided for the sake of fact-based evidence.

However, in practice this rule is often broken. In (post-)Yugoslavia, established historians in the 1980-1990s were actively fictionalizing reality by abusing history. Poets and novelists like Dobrica Ćosić and Radovan Karadžić were political leaders and war mongers (i.e., criminals) at the same time. In spreading fear and groundless accusations (as in the false assertion of genocide against the Serbian people by Albanians in the notorious *memorandum* of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (1985-1986)) writers, historians, and other public intellectuals all together helped paving the way to *real* genocide.

Does the conflation of myths, arbitrary storytelling and history for warfare imply that there cannot be any beneficial relationship between the stories in fiction and the history in historiography? Writer Lana Bastašić opposes this opinion: As quoted by Sarajevo’s newspaper *Oslobođenje*, “it sometimes appears that the biggest truth is in the biggest fiction”. Author Ivana Bodrožić from Croatia had been a refugee from Vukovar in the 1990s and (indirectly) supports Bastašić’s position. In her novel *Hotel Zagorje*, she fictionalized and abstracted her own experience, far from lapsing into revisionism and falsehood. Her novel shows that truthful stories can sometimes be more easily expressed in a (semi-)fictionalized way – especially when memory is still fresh and historical protagonists alive.

(Semi)fictional stories may lack the academic rigor of historiography, yet they still can act as icebreakers for critical historiography in conflict-laden societies, by enhancing empathy and the prerequisite openness. In the post-Yugoslav context, fiction can also help to overcome remnants of war-time enmity, as the anthology *Zajednička Čitaonica (Shared reading room)* presented at KROKODIL showed. As a collection of shared stories both “from before” and from current times, the collection offers a convincing argument for the benefit of literature as a liberal, relieving *soft power*.

<sup>1</sup> Flood, A. (2018, February 20). Pressure from Turkey blamed as Sarajevo reverses decision to honour Orhan Pamuk. *The Guardian*.

Every contemporary production of historiography and fiction, including film, succumb to their real-time digitalization and multiplication. Digitalization's positive and problematic impacts on the discourse of revision and revisionism were discussed at the round table at Humboldt University Berlin (October 2021).

In the background of the program, the potential to challenge illiberal revisionism through digital transmission was best illustrated by Jasmila Žbanić's film *Quo Vadis, Aida?* Treating the genocide in Srebrenica in a semi-fictionalized way, public screening of Žbanić's film was restricted in Serbia, while even forbidden in Bosnia's entity Republika Srpska.

However, free online screenings allowed the film to break the walls of silencing and denial. Likewise, all historians involved in *Histoire pour la liberté* shared their own experiences as editors and authors: often, the click rate statistics would reveal unexpected numbers and page views from areas with otherwise restricted access.

Conversely, digital opinion platforms can quantitatively dilute these achievements. Global online platforms are often in use, even by historians and students, in order to discuss matters of historiography. Yet, according to Nick Srnicek, they should rather be seen as market platforms and the shape of capitalism's present-day stage of development.

Following the logic of information scientist Constanze Kurz, it is even highly misleading to call these promotional platforms "social media". Opinions, rather than facts, are traded and amplified by platform owners and their opaque algorithms. Against the sheer power of the trade logic of the opinion market, the impact of fact checking historians may remain comparatively nominal.

Today, the widespread pairing of populism and revisionism is of increasing global concern. Only a few weeks after the last event of *Histoire pour la liberté*, Russia's Putin-regime invaded Ukraine, accompanied by heavily exploiting historical tropes in a revisionist manner. Disinformation and historical revisionism, as we would see throughout 2022, pose a conjoint threat to liberal, democratic societies *per se*. Therefore, we could finally ask if we couldn't have learned earlier from the Balkans' experience in the 1990s, and weren't there also warning signs emanating from the Russian Federation?

As the Russian dissident Kara-Muzra stated in 2017, we could have known for a very long time of what sort Vladimir Putin and his rule were. Historians and critical intellectuals, targeted by the regime, could have helped to dismantle revisionism – if they had been listened to.

The commonplace "we never learn from history" is, of course, a platitude. Yet, inverting it to the more programmatic slogan "let us learn from history!" could likewise lead to rational policy making. In the very sense of the program title *Histoire pour la liberté*, the timely detection of revisionist populism, by the help of historians, can avert the rise of autocratic rule. Revisionist populism's systemic repercussions on liberal democracy are well-known – and should make us act. ■■



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# the future without remembrance

Dragan Markovina

The year is 2023. Most of the wars ended in 1995, except the one in Kosovo which ended four years later. This means that almost a quarter of a century has passed in the absence of wars, with the countries and people of the former common state living with their consequences, while facing the past still remains a relevant topic.

That is why, for those who do not have the will or the nerve to continue reading, I will immediately answer the question of what stage the process of facing the past is at in the region. The answer is that this discussion has been closed and realistically no longer figures in post-Yugoslav societies. If it was ever really a topic, it was confined to the efforts of brave alternative circles and individuals, and later professionalized non-governmental organizations. However, the topic of facing the past never became mainstream, nor was there ever any prospect of it becoming so. Even if much more had been done, in addition to everything that was done by these people, this situation would not have changed, nor would a real process of facing the past have been widely accepted, for the simple reason that the post-Yugoslav societies did not want that confrontation. Their states believed, and continue to believe, that reconciling with the past is not necessary.

The nationalist reality simply cannot tolerate its founding phase being questioned, and has done everything to prevent that, while the majority of citizens simply want to live their lives and leave the past, especially their past choices, behind them. Those who specifically experienced trauma are the only ones left who engage with that past on a daily basis. Some of them have not managed to let go of their trauma, the role of victim and the anger caused by the trauma, others emigrated and never returned. Only a few continue to work to ensure that the past does not repeat itself.

To put it simply, I think the time has come for people like us, if I may speak in first-person plural form, who are engaged in confronting local societies with the past, primarily with what was done to others in their name, to admit we have failed in our efforts. At best, official state policies ignore these organizations and people. At worst, they belittle and threaten them. While roughly the same percentage of people who were aware of war crimes and policies to begin with share a belief in the need to face the past, these efforts are simply not enough to reach the general public.



For the sake of illustration, it is enough to look at the enormous effort that both Documenta and RECOM have invested in documenting people's memories of the wars and in listing and identifying all war victims, while being sabotaged by states at every step both with regard to data and the identification of people, let alone the public narratives. The hindrances have become so self-evident that no one even mentions the creation or application of the brilliantly written history lesson on Vukovar anymore, which was supposed to be taught as part of a process of peaceful reintegration. Likewise, the support of local states to the RECOM Initiative, even when it was somewhat formalized, for example through the meeting between former Croatian President Ivo Josipović and Nataša Kandić, Serbian human rights activist and founder of the Humanitarian Law Center, was never fully implemented and has long been forgotten. All those great gestures that might have seemed important at the time (joint visits to places of suffering by Ivo Josipović and Boris Tadić as presidents of Croatia and Serbia, Vučić's visit to Srebrenica, Croatia taking part in the reconstruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar, the important joint commemoration of *Oluja*, but also the commemoration of the post-*Oluja* crimes by members of Plenković's Government from HDZ and SDSS, as well as the peace efforts of Veran Matić as an official of the Government of Serbia, and Sanader's famous "Hristos se rodi" at the SNV Christmas reception in Zagreb). These were eventually forgotten as if they had never happened. In the political sense, things have returned to the initial post-war settings, i.e. back into the atmosphere of the late 1990s. Recent efforts to start to warm relations again, marked by the visit of Ivica Dačić, former spokesperson of Slobodan Milošević's party, who currently serves as Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs, to an SNV reception and Tomislav Žigmanov's (from the Croatian community) participation in Vučić's government, represent minimal progress, but now without any efforts to clear up the past and face it.

Therefore, the official state policies (i.e. the official culture of memory) completely forgot about these gestures and surrendered to triumphalism once again, accompanied by a dose of fascination with the war and Tudmanism on the part of Croatian President Zoran Milanović as well as an increasing spectacularization of horror (which includes the dramatic reenactment of the refugee exodus of Serbs from Croatia in 2022 in Novi Sad which occurred with the support of the Government of Serbia). Additionally, all films or series that receive strong support from the state, such as Vrdoljak's 'General' or the current Serbian film and TV show 'Oluja', do not deviate from official memory policies in terms of content. If we add to that the current beatification of Ratko Mladić on the streets of Belgrade and the fact that his mural was practically guarded by the police together with various informal groups, it is clear that the recent past is not being faced by politicians.

This also applies to Sarajevo, where the city authorities, led currently by mayor Benjamina Karić, decided to ignore all rational and well-intentioned objections regarding the erection of a memorial to the murdered, mostly Serbian, civilians in Kazani. They instead erected a memorial which does not specify who was killed and why, nor who the killers were. All of this along with a persistent refusal to change the generalizing title 'Serbian criminals' on the memorial plaque placed on the renovated City Hall in Sarajevo, the former university library.

Milorad Dodik and leading intellectuals from Republika Srpska consistently deny that genocide was committed in Srebrenica. The facts established regarding the shelling of the Markala market are also denied.

Throughout the majority Croatian regions in Herzegovina, from Mostar, through Čapljina to Neum, Herceg-Bosnia flags and murals dedicated to Slobodan Praljak<sup>1</sup> jump out at passers-by from behind every corner. Nothing has changed in the official interpretation of the wars of the 1990s.

1 Who fatally poisoned himself upon hearing the guilty verdict for war crimes in the ICTY courtroom

What is new in the story is that the dark spots of the past are simply not paid attention to anymore. NGOs and the same individuals as always come forward and try to confront society with what remains hidden, but there is simply no echo or major reaction.

During the pandemic, director Zlatko Paković put on a play about Srebrenica, *When we the murdered rise*, produced by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia (a non-governmental organization). It was performed publicly at the Center for Cultural Decontamination and produced protests by radical right-wingers as well as some criticism in the mainstream media, but in the end remained a one-time act of resistance, today thoroughly forgotten. Paković does the same thing in communities across the region, encountering objections, just like Oliver Frljić once did. Frljić's performances dedicated to facing the past were sold out, attracted a large number of violent protesters and were covered in all mainstream media, yet failed to bring society even a millimeter closer to facing the past. Everything stayed the same, but numerous theater directors were forced to resign due to the involvement of Oliver Frljić. He himself went to Western European theaters, fed up with the violence he personally encountered in the region and aware of the futility of his efforts.

At the same time, all attempts to create joint history textbooks and literature either failed or were thoroughly ignored, such as the project led by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, which never made it into the curriculum. In the end, many joint multiperspective books were written. A large project of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia dedicated to Yugoslav history is publicly available (two volumes of which, created by a whole range of historians from all over Yugoslavia, have already been published with an active website). Again, without any major public response.

The Sarajevo Center for Nonviolent Action published a number of valuable publications and organized many joint visits to places of suffering. The Belgrade Forum ZFD launched a project called 'The moment the war began for me', organizing a polemical debate along with a book of stories. This debate, which I personally participated in, attracted solid public interest, considering its polemical essence, thanks to the composition of the speakers. Yet again, without any effect because no one managed to convince anyone of anything.

The declaration entitled 'Obranimo povijest / Odbranimo istoriju'<sup>2</sup>, which was signed by a number of critically oriented historians from the region, directed against the instrumentalization of science, was again in vain.

In Sarajevo, on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the beginning of the siege of the city, a lot of activities were organized, from exhibitions, to concerts and interventions on the city streets, to performances and round tables. Again, without any influence on how this topic is observed in East Sarajevo, where Serbs dominate.

If we were to try to summarize all these data, which represent only a small part of what is taking place both in terms of official and alternative memory politics, we would realize that the official 'truths' follow nationalist interpretations from the 1990s. At the same time, there is a serious and extensive effort to confront local societies with the past, but all these people have been successfully discredited in the mainstream public as so-called *autochauvinists*, foreign agents, or at the very least stubborn dogmatists, which is why their activities are only seriously followed by a small percentage of people.

Bearing this in mind, it is clear that the idea of facing the past has been thoroughly defeated. Yet these activities have left an imprint, so that everything that can help heal society is available to anyone who is interested.

2 T/N: lit. "Let us defend history" 'Povijest' is the Croatian word for history, whereas 'istorija' is the Serbian word.

As far as judicial practice is concerned, judgments against “one’s own” have been adopted, for example, against Tomislav Merčep or Branimir Glavaš in Croatia and against the kidnappers and murderers of people from the train in Štrpci. However, all those processes were protracted, the sentences were ridiculously mild, and the essence was not explored. As a result, even those judgments failed to help with facing the past. The current indictment against Croatian pilots in Serbia, for shelling a refugee convoy, will help even less.

There are only rare examples of joint commemoration, such as the raising of a memorial plaque to Admiral Barović on Vis or the contested plaque near the camp on Mamula in Croatia (which ended up being turned into a complex of luxury apartments).

In the end, we are left with real life, intense and pervasive, which takes place independently of these topics, because politics no longer truly directs or touches it.

Parallel to the logic of life, the reality is that the only thing left to do is to not mention the recent traumatic past and to try to move on. Which again, due to accumulated traumas, the unstable geopolitical situation and the war ideologies which are still alive, is practically impossible.

That is why we are constantly spinning in circles and living in a state of near war psychosis, now caused largely by the conflict over the interpretation of the wars for the Yugoslav heritage. ■■■



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