

Pathways to Reconciliation

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This volume is an expression of intention by a wide range of actors in-country and internationally for a peaceful, democratic, socially harmonious and prosperous future for Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). Not all the papers gathered here agree exactly on what this future might be like or how it is to be achieved, but they are unified in a rejection of ethnic division and the politics of resentment, and in a call for processes of justice across ethnic and other political divisions. Most of the papers emerged from the international conference *Pathways to Reconciliation and Global Human Rights*, held in Sarajevo in August 2005, organized by the Globalism Institute (RMIT University) in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) BiH.

As is known all too well, during the 1990s Yugoslavia was torn apart in a series of wars. Bosnia-Herzegovina, renowned for its long tradition of multiculturalism, suffered the greatest losses, with some 200,000 killed, 30,000 missing and 2.2 million displaced.¹ Infrastructure was destroyed and human rights systematically abused in violent campaigns known as ‘ethnic cleansing’, which created territorial and political division along ethnic lines in most of the country. The territorial gains of the bloody conflict were partly recognized by the Dayton Peace Accords by legalizing the division of the country into two separate political entities: the Serb Republic (Republika Srpska – RS) and the BiH Federation (FBiH).

Over the last ten years, significant progress has been made in rebuilding shattered infrastructure, but many obstacles to social reconstruction exist. The framework provided by the Dayton Agreement – which contributed to ending the war – seems to have reached its limits in bringing positive changes to a stalemate situation. In fact, the framework agreement now confirms negative aspects of ethnic division across all areas of social life by treating such differences of identity as best managed by territorial separation. Parallel education systems, separate institutions and different communal narratives based on an ethnocentric worldview are widening the cultural gap between ethnic communities.

This is especially true for younger generations who were too young to remember when Bosnia-Herzegovina was a vibrant multicultural and multi-ethnic society.

They have been growing up in towns and villages dominated by a single ethnic group, and their education has been heavily influenced by exclusivist forms of ethno-nationalism. By contrast, many of their parents and relatives, from all ethnic backgrounds, still remember the times when they lived with their neighbours from other ethnic and religious groups, and when inevitable tensions were managed by complex and multi-layered processes of social mediation, including at the village level. Many of these people have re-established contact and even old friendships with members 'on the other side' of the ethnic divide. However, in the aftermath of the war such grassroots reconciliation has been suppressed and discouraged by the leading nationalist parties. In the climate of uncertainty where the present is overshadowed by a recent traumatic past, feelings of insecurity and fear are exploited by nationalist politicians, intent on maintaining their positions of power by keeping peoples (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats) apart and, in many instances, keeping them away from their homes, from places to which they belonged and still feel attached.

All these issues were frankly discussed at the *Pathways to Reconciliation and Global Human Rights* conference, which attracted a number of prominent international, regional and local participants including academics, human rights activists, NGOs, international organisations and associations of survivors. The conference did not avoid pointing to many of the known social, political and economic difficulties that Bosnia-Herzegovina has gone through during its first post-war decade. It also unveiled the great need, willingness and readiness to move on and start an active process of reconciliation in the country. Those most affected, such as mothers of the missing, former concentration camp inmates and survivors from places that went through some of the most horrific atrocities, such as Srebrenica and Prijedor, were the most articulate in expressing their active interest in and support for reconciliation processes. In contrast, those ethno-nationalist politicians who continue to dominate many of the country's political institutions generally eschew discussion of the reconciliation process.

To many of those survivors of ethnic cleansing who suffered the consequences of ethno-nationalism, reconciliation seems to be essential to restoring meaning and dignity at both a personal and a community level. This goes beyond a superficial 'shake hands and forget' attitude. In their view, justice is seen as playing the central role in acknowledging suffering caused to them by perpetrators they knew. Each case of human rights abuse, be it a killing, rape, or burning of a house, each shell and sniper bullet fired at civilians, had a perpetrator with an identity behind it, committing the crime, pulling the trigger. Such a legal process makes it clear these crimes were not committed by whole ethnic groups but, rather, were committed in their names. As one survivor, a mother from Srebrenica, said:

I want to know who the war criminals are and to see them brought to justice, so that I can have a coffee with a Serb person, sit on a bus next to someone, without thinking this man may be a war criminal, someone who might have killed my sons.

A number of papers in this volume recognize the role of justice as an important precondition for a genuine process of reconciliation and healing. An effective

judicial system helps avoid collective blame of whole ethnic groups by maintaining that each atrocity remains a criminal act that needs to be processed through the legal system. While each community should feel a degree of collective responsibility when dealing with 'their own' war criminals, there needs to be a clear separation between a broader civil or moral responsibility and the legally defined responsibility of those who directly committed, ordered or promoted atrocities and war crimes. Many of those indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) have tried to do the exact opposite by hiding behind 'their' people, presenting criminal acts such as killing, rape, torture and pillage as justifiable 'collective' actions committed in the name and on behalf of their people.

To achieve justice is a long and complicated process. While the ICTY is dealing with some of the most prominent war criminals and the crimes they committed, there are thousands of 'smaller' war criminals who also need to be brought to justice. Recently, the State Court of BiH was established to deal with these issues of war crimes domestically and, even though it has not yet processed a single case, its existence is a promising development, reconstructing the state with judicial powers over the whole of the territory of BiH. Similar reforms have been completed in defence and border control, while reform of separate police forces has been a work in progress. Such institutional reconstruction is a parallel process with social and political reconstruction. These three pillars of reforms – social, political and institutional – form the backbone for the new constitutional arrangements that will bring BiH closer to the EU integration processes.

The idea of joining the EU is an attractive one, and one of the few political options enthusiastically supported by both ethno-nationalists and their opponents, the moderate politicians. It has also been supported in countries like Australia. There, the diaspora community has been presented with an opportunity for involvement in the economic and institutional transformation of the homeland, which sections of the community have been quick to take up.

Within Bosnia-Herzegovina, civil society organizations have taken the initiative into their own hands, mostly by expressing their dissatisfaction with policies of leading nationalist parties and deteriorating living standards. From early spring to late autumn 2005, the Association of BiH farmers staged massive demonstrations across the country and set up a camp in front of the BiH Parliament in Sarajevo, where the farmers stayed many months peacefully demanding their livelihoods be protected. In late August 2005, university students joined the farmers and organized a 'bus tour' protest, visiting all the major centres in both BiH entities, demanding social change that would also include more opportunities for younger people. Associations of survivors and family associations of the missing have been participating in forums and roundtables and openly talking about reconciliation. Independent newspapers like *Dani*, *Slobodna Bosna* and *Nezavisne Novine* have been highly critical of the government and various forms of ethno-nationalist politics. Local and regional arts and culture, including pop culture, have also emerged as important vehicles for moving beyond nationalism and exclusion.

None of this, however, implies that society in BiH is going to be completely restored to the way it used to be before the war. The war has taken its toll in terms of significant loss of human life, physical and psychological wounds, devastated infrastructure and economy, and a radical change in demographics due to 'ethnic cleansing'. The ethnic homogenization of Bosnian towns, written in blood through the genocidal policy of 'ethnic cleansing' and legitimized through the Dayton Peace Agreement, has continued by attrition since the war ended. Hundreds of thousands of people have sold or exchanged their homes and moved into a town dominated by their ethnic group. Hundreds of thousands of refugees have never returned from their 'temporary' refuge in many countries across the globe, while many more thousands have joined them in exile in the post-war period. Statistics about 'return of refugees', even those from the UNHCR², do not really represent reality on the ground, as they refer more to the numbers of processed applications for reclaiming properties or rebuilding devastated homes than to the number of people permanently returning home. The fact is that many people do not choose to stay in their original hometown. This is especially true for many younger families with children, who stay permanently in their original homes only if no alternatives are available. Some trends about 'exchange' of domiciles, and hence population, have clear and well-known patterns. For instance, the former residents of the towns of Bratunac, in eastern Bosnia (in RS), and Hadžići, near Sarajevo (in BiH Federation), in most cases exchanged or sold their homes to each other; Bosniaks from Bratunac moved to Hadžići while Serbs from Hadžići moved to Bosniaks' houses in Bratunac. While this 'population exchange' has been done peacefully, the psychological scarring of those who left their hometowns where they lived for generations has been accepted and even promoted as a patriotic act by ethno-nationalist political elites.

Those who took refuge abroad or migrated immediately after the war have found their new homes in different corners of the globe, from the polar circle of Sweden to suburbs of Chicago and St Louis to metropolitan Berlin and Melbourne. Like any other diaspora, Bosnians are a heterogeneous group of people with all the attendant social variables. What is commonly shared between most of the diaspora's members, however, is the experience of forced displacement, feelings of betrayal by politicians and sometimes, even worse, by their former neighbours and 'friends', as well as feelings of nostalgia for a homeland that can never be restored. Apart from many country-specific associations and clubs representing the BiH diaspora in different countries, there are hundreds of thousands of 'former' Bosnians actively participating as productive members of society in their 'new' homelands. In this context, identification with the Bosnian diaspora is not so much with a monolithic global community than with Swedish Bosnians, American Bosnians or Australian Bosnians.

This is especially true for the younger generation, those who were small children when they fled Bosnia-Herzegovina and are now in their late teens and early twenties. Many of them are university students at different campuses worldwide or workers in occupations reflecting a great degree of integration and adaptation to the new social environment. Most of these young people – not to mention all

those children born to Bosnian parents in exile – have spent most of their lives outside their country of birth, and their sense of ‘Bosnian-ness’ is much more fluid than that of their parents’ generation. Nonetheless, for many of them the ‘old’ homeland has almost mythical connotations and they show active interest in their place of origin. Some of them even decide to return and visit Bosnia-Herzegovina; others consider linking their professional careers to their Bosnian background.

While every person in and from Bosnia-Herzegovina has his/her personal story about war in their homeland and their neighbourhood, there are also many ‘outsiders’ with their stories of people and events they have encountered. Hundreds of published books on the Bosnian war are only one proof of this. There are many more unwritten oral accounts told to friendly outsiders, which are also part of the broader Bosnian-Herzegovinian narrative. Some of these stories find expression in the papers included in this issue of *Local–Global*, which is dedicated to a peaceful, democratic, socially harmonious and prosperous future for Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Endnotes

¹ See UNHCR, <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/publ/opendoc.htm?tbl=PUBL&page=home&id=3b81266713>. This is, however, subject to debate as Mr Mirsad Tokača, director of the Sarajevo-based Research and Documentation Centre, argues that the number of people killed during the war in BiH is closer to 100,000 than to 200,000.

² While the UNHCR report states that between 1996 and 2005 there were more than 550,000 registered returns, there are no reliable statistics about the number of people who actually stayed in their homes after they ‘returned’. See reports available at <http://www.unhcr.ba>.