

Essay on Development Policy

Diverging Narratives of War as Obstacles to Peace and Reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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1. Introduction

Almost twenty years after the war there is still no positive peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H)¹. Instead, ethnic divisions are deeply institutionalised in the political system of the country and the relationships between the three main ethnic groups (the Bosnian Croats, the Bosnian Serbs, and the Bosniaks²) are bad and characterised by an appalling lack of trust and interaction. There is thus an urgent need in B&H to address institutionalised drivers of conflict (e.g. through constitutional reform) but also to push reconciliation processes forward³.

This essay proposes that one major obstacle for reconciliation and sustainable peace in B&H is the prevalence of diverging, ethno-nationalistic narratives about the war and the absence of a shared narrative of the past. It is thus the purpose of this essay:

To analyse diverging narratives of war in B&H and to assess how these narratives can be addressed in order to contribute to a shared understanding of the past and a process of reconciliation.

To do so, the essay assesses current drivers of conflict, the needs of the population in terms of reconciliation and the nature and consequences of diverging narratives (chapter 2 and 3). Based on this, existing and needed strategies for both local civil society actors and international development organisations present in B&H are identified (chapter 4)⁴.

¹ The differentiation between positive and negative peace was put forward by John Galtung and is widely accepted. Negative peace is understood as the absence of organised collective violence between states or groups. A typical way to create negative peace is a cease-fire after a war. The term 'negative' is value-free and only implies that something negative (i.e. the violence) has stopped. Positive peace includes more than just the absence of violence, but is vaguer as a concept (since peace itself is a complex, long-term and multi-layered process). It is associated with cooperative and harmonious social relations, social justice and equality, with an integrative human society and with the absence of structural violence. Structural violence is perpetrated by social/economical/political structures or institutions that prevent people from meeting their needs and exercising their human rights. Examples of structural violence are discrimination due to racism or sexism (Galtung 1967, Irenees 2007, TWB 2011).

² 'Bosniak' is the term commonly used for the Muslim population of B&H.

³ This is widely agreed on among researchers; see e.g. Fischer and Petrovic-Ziemer 2013: ii, 6-8, Nansen 2012:4, Hitchner and Joseph 2013.

⁴ This essay, and especially chapter 2, is partly based on the 'Conflict Analysis' written by the author in October 2013 within the framework of the project assignment of the NADEL MAS Cycle 2012-2014. All original sources are indicated.

2. Bosnia and Herzegovina – From War to Peace?

In the wake of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, B&H experienced a brutal war that lasted from 1992 to 1995 (ICTY 2014). This war is often considered a prime example of the so-called ‘new wars’, characterised by an erosion of the state monopoly of violence, an asymmetry between the warring parties and a deliberate targeting of civilians (including ethnic cleansing, massive displacement of civilians and acts of genocide). War crimes were committed by all sides, but the Bosniaks suffered about 66% of all casualties (Kivimäki et al. 2012: 14-16). The war was finally ended in December 1995 by the peace treaty of Dayton. It defined B&H as a sovereign state consisting of two political entities: the Federation (dominated by Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks) and the Republika Srpska (RS) (dominated by Bosnian Serbs) (AKUF 2013). Also, the three main ethnic groups were defined as constituent ethnic communities (Fischer and Petrovic-Ziemer 2013: 7). However, B&H is utterly polarized along ethnic lines until today and has not managed the transition from negative peace to a sustainable positive peace. Instead, deep ethnic divisions paralyse the Bosnian society (ibid.: 10, Hitchner and Joseph 2013, Nansen 2010: I, Pasch 2012: 48):

- First and foremost, ethnicity is institutionalised in the **political system** and the constitution of B&H (Fischer and Petrovic-Ziemer 2013: 150, Nansen 2010: 4-5). Ethnic quotas determine political participation (Kivimäki et al. 2012: 24)⁵ and the electoral system provides no incentive for parties, candidates or voters to reach across ethnic divides (Hitchner and Joseph 2013)⁶.
- The **demographic distribution** of B&H’s population mirrors and furthers ethnic divisions, since the ethnic groups are geographically concentrated in the area of

⁵ Quotas determine, for example, that the tripartite presidency of B&H consists of one representative from each constituent ethnic community (Fischer and Petrovic-Ziemer 2013: 7). Quotas also regulate the representation in the Upper House of Parliament and they structure employment in public institutions (Nansen 2010: 6). Also, quotas presuppose singular ethnicity (Kivimäki et al. 2012: 24) and thus have significant consequences for anyone who does not (wish to) base his/her identity on ethnicity or is of mixed-ethnic origin. In addition, quotas discriminate against non-constituent ethnical communities, the so-called ‘others’. These minorities cannot participate in political life on equal footing, which is a violation of human rights. Dervo Sejdic (Roma) and Jakob Finci (Jewish) were plaintiffs in the famous Sejdic-Finci case, which resulted in a 2009 ruling by the European Court of Human Rights that forces B&H to change the constitution in order to allow everyone to run for governing posts currently reserved for the three constituent ethnic groups. However, decision makers in B&H have hitherto failed to agree on a reform to implement the ruling and have passed numerous deadlines and negotiations rounds, even though the implementation is a pre-condition for B&H’s submission of an EU membership application (ibid.: 33, Balkan Insight 2013, Balkan Insight 2013b, Latal 2014).

⁶ B&H’s political parties define themselves along ethnic lines rather than according to a left-right spectrum. Politicians tend to focus on ethno-nationalistic issues in order to avoid addressing real grievances (such as corruption and unemployment). They make frequent use of ethno-national rhetoric and fear-mongering (thus contributing to fear and hatred between the ethnic groups). The voters on their part favour candidates from ‘their own’ ethnic group (Fischer and Petrovic-Ziemer 2013: 80, Nansen 2010: 5, Nansen 2012: 4).

'their' respective entity (Hitchner and Joseph 2013, Fischer and Petrovic-Ziemer 2013: 10, Pasch 2012: 48,)⁷.

- Conflict lines are institutionalised in the **educational system**, as most schools are ethnically segregated and use separate, ethnicity-specific curricula (Fischer and Petrovic-Ziemer 2013: 80, Nansen 2010: 5)⁸. Young people in B&H thus grow up in a polarized society and have limited knowledge of and interaction with other ethnic groups (Hitchner and Joseph 2013).
- Finally, **social divisions** based on ethnicity persist in B&H until today. Even though the population mostly coexists peacefully (Nansen 2010: 14-15), the inter-ethnic relationships are bad or non-existent (Pasch 2012: 63). There is little interaction and communication between the groups, but instead a generally negative attitude towards each other, prejudices and a high level of mistrust (ibid.: ii, Fischer and Petrovic-Ziemer 2013: 47, 150, Kivimäki et al. 2012: 37, 40, Nansen 2010: 12, 30). Crucially, there is no common understanding of what happened during the war. Instead, ethno-nationalistic narratives contain conflicting interpretations of the past and contradictory facts (Nansen 2010: ii, UNDP 2012: 44).

To conclude, institutional and social cleavages persist in B&H until today and need to be addressed through both institutional reforms and reconciliation efforts (Fischer and Petrovic-Ziemer 2013: ii, 6-8, Hitchner and Joseph 2013, Nansen 2012: 4)⁹. This essay focuses on the latter and specifically on strategies to address the diverging narratives which contribute to upholding the ethnical polarization of B&H.

⁷ While a geographical concentration of ethnic groups also existed before the war, the heightened ethnic purity of the two entities is a result of massive displacement during the war. In the aftermath of the conflict, many refugees did not return to their pre-war homes but instead settled in 'their' entity (Fischer and Petrovic-Ziemer 2013: 10, Pasch 2012: 48).

⁸ School segregation is largely due to the population structure of B&H (ethnic concentration), but is also a result of self-segregation (parents send their children to a school of the same ethnic background in another area). Separate curricula exist for the subjects history, geography, language, literature and religion. These are taught in ethnically segregated classes with separate textbooks (Fischer and Petrovic-Ziemer 2013: 80, Nansen 2010: 5).

⁹ This is all the more urgent given that the dire economic situation in B&H increases the potential for social unrest and frustration violence especially by disillusioned young people (Kivimäki et al. 2012: 12-13, 50-52, 60-62). Instances of frustration violence could be witnessed in February 2014, when protests in B&H escalated into violence (Jukic 2014). For more information about the ongoing (now peaceful) 'Bosnia Protests 2014', which are the largest protest in two decades, see Balkan Insight 2014.

3. Diverging Narratives of War

In B&H, there is no commonly accepted narrative about the recent war (Kivimäki et al. 2012: 17, 43). Instead, “three versions of the truth” (Orentlicher 2010: 99), one for each ethnic group, exist in parallel. These conflictive interpretations are widely perceived to stand in the way of reconciliation and sustainable peace (CRS 2013: 2, Kivimäki et al. 2012: 17, 43, UN 2014, UNDP 2012: 9) and have several problematic consequences for B&H today:

- First, the absence of a commonly accepted truth about the war means that war events can easily be **manipulated and exploited for political aims** (Nansen 2010: 29-30) and possibly even stirred into violent effect (UN 2014). As a matter of fact, B&H’s politicians tend to use (and shape) narratives for their own purposes and perpetuate ethnic interpretations of history (see Orentlicher 2010: 97). Such manipulation is facilitated by the strong connection of narratives to feelings of injustice, fear and the impression that one’s own ethnic group is still being threatened (Nansen 2010: 29, see UNDP 2013: 18).
- Secondly, ethno-political narratives in B&H are accompanied by identities based on **victimhood**. Partial narratives further the believe that the own ethnic group suffered the most without committing any violence. This leads to an absurd competition over victim status and fosters stereotypes and collective blame. Also, it prevents the acknowledgment of the suffering of other ethnic groups, which is crucial for reconciliation (Fischer and Petrovic-Ziemer 2013: 62-63, 146-147).
- Finally, diverging narratives have a strong influence on **youth**, who often have an imprecise and distorted knowledge of the past. This is because one-sided narratives are passed on from parents to children (Nansen 2010: 29), because young people are subject to ethnicity-specific school curricula, and because they have limited opportunities to crosscheck ethno-nationalistic narratives in direct interaction with members of other ethnic groups (see Paul 2010: 9, UN 2014).

Opposing narratives in B&H have a diversity of subjects, but prototypical examples focus on the responsibility for war crimes and on specific war events. The ethno-nationalistic

narratives surrounding the **genocide in Srebrenica** are presented below as a particularly glaring and disturbing example of diverging interpretations of historical facts:

In July 1995 the Army of the RS killed about 8'000 (mainly Muslim) civilians near Srebrenica. Both the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) have established that this massacre amounted to genocide. Nevertheless, the happenings in Srebrenica are disputed. On the one hand, ethno-nationalistic (Bosnian) Serb narratives try to justify and/or deny the genocide by claiming that the number of victims was much lower or that the massacre was just a reaction to previous crimes against them. These distorted narratives were long supported by politicians and the authorities¹⁰. By today, there is progress: both the government of Serbia (in 2010) and also the RS authorities (in 2004) have acknowledged and apologised for the massacre (but stopped short of using the wording genocide and of accepting political responsibility). On the other hand, the genocide is engrained in the narrative and conscience of Bosniaks. Accordingly, Bosniak ethno-nationalistic interpretations of the events tend to exaggerate the victim numbers (Kivimäki et al. 2012: 41-43, 65, Orentlicher 2010: 94-96).

In light of their grave consequences, addressing diverging narratives and working towards a common interpretation of the past in B&H is crucial (Orentlicher 2010: 90, UN 2014). Given the narratives' imperviousness to facts, however, this is no easy task (Franovic 2008: 21). Existing and potential strategies to do so are discussed below.

¹⁰ Notorious for his denial of the Srebrenica genocide is the president of the RS, Milorad Dodik (ICTJ 2011). Also, the early reaction of the RS authorities to the ICTY ruling was to claim that a significantly smaller number of people (2000) died and that they were soldiers killed in battle. Allegedly, 'only' 200 army members were killed in violation of the Geneva Conventions (Orentlicher 2010: 94).

4. Addressing Diverging Narratives

Efforts to address diverging narratives in B&H should be part of a holistic reform approach that strives for institutional change (Jones et al. 2014: 23, Kivimäki et al 2012: 97). For now, this essay focuses on concrete strategies for local and international development actors to tackle diverging narratives. Such strategies must go beyond classic reconciliation initiatives that foster inter-ethnic interaction and dialogue. Linked to the consequences of diverging narratives described in the above chapter, strategies specifically also need to:

- Reduce the possibility for manipulation of narratives by providing historic facts and evidence (see 4.1);
- Reconcile diverging narratives and working towards a common, inter-ethnic narrative of B&H's past (see 4.2);
- Focus on youth (see 4.3).

4.1 Establishing Facts

Establishing facts and collecting evidence is important to counter diverging narratives (see UN 2014) and can be achieved through judiciary means but also through non-judicial fact-finding activities (such as truth commissions and initiatives of civil society organisations (CSOs)):

- The **ICTY** was established in 1993 to prosecute the individuals responsible for violations of international humanitarian law committed in the territory of the former Yugoslavia (Jones et al. 2014: 6). While reconciliation is not the purpose of the ICTY, it does contribute to it by establishing historical facts, acknowledging the suffering of victims (ibid.: 15, Orentlicher 2010: 43, 100) and by shrinking “the margins of plausible denial” (Orentlicher 2010: 89). As the example in chapter 3 demonstrates, the ICTY (and ICJ) rulings were important for the authorities’ progress towards acknowledging the crimes in Srebrenica (ibid.: 95-96).

Yet, the ICTY is confronted with two challenges: First, there is an enormous distance between The Hague and the general population of B&H who is not sufficiently informed about the produced evidence and facts (ibid.: 101, NZZ 2013). It is therefore important **to strengthen the outreach of the ICTY and to close the**

information gap between the court and the people (see UNDP 2012: 12-13). This is a task for the ICTY itself, but, given the high level of trust local CSOs enjoy (ibid.), they could also contribute to informing the citizens about the ICTY's work. Secondly, the ICTY rulings are themselves heavily contested by ethno-nationalistic narratives, which generally question responsibility for war crimes. Instead, war criminals are portrayed as heroes and the ICTY is condemned whenever it is not in line with one's narrative (Fischer and Petrovic-Ziemer 2013: 11, Orentlicher 2010: 40)¹¹. Given this continued contestation of the ICTY verdicts, additional strategies to establish facts are needed.

- **B&H's national jurisdiction** is just as important for establishing facts and evidence. However, there is an overarching need for reform of the judicial system. Currently, human and financial resources are lacking at all levels, jurisprudence is not harmonised and political parties attempt to exercise influence over the judiciary (EC 2013: 13-14, see also ICTJ 2010: 5). **Supporting (and pushing for) justice reform** is thus another important strategy, which already exists but should be strengthened. Institutional development partners of B&H, such as the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), are active in this domain (SDC 2012: 11, 18).
- A **truth commission** is an official body that enquires into human rights abuses, gathers evidence from victims, witnesses and perpetrators (often in public hearings) and delivers concluding reports. Its goal is to establish a precise description of the actual facts and to "help a society understand and acknowledge a past which is either cause for dispute or is disavowed" (Trial 2014). Until today, there has been no truth commission in B&H (Jones et al. 2014: 22)¹². **Supporting the establishment of a truth commission** is thus another valuable strategy. Local CSOs should be closely involved in this process (ICTJ 2004: 8). International development actors could support the

¹¹ While Bosniaks usually support the verdicts, Bosnian Serbs and Croats tend to contest the judgements (Kivimäki et al. 2012: 65). There is less outright denial of war crimes nowadays (maybe due to the evidence established), but accusing the ICTY of a bias against one's own ethnic group is common – especially among (Bosnian) Serbs. It is argued that the ICTY is a political court, established to discredit the Serbian side (Jones et al. 2014: 7, 10, 13; Orentlicher 2010: 91). Politicians often further this perception (Kivimäki et al. 2012: 65). An example for high-level political contestation of the ICTY is the UN debate of April 2013, where the Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic accused The Hague of being an inquisition and of lynch-mobbing everything Serbian (Ristic 2013).

¹² In 1997 the ICTY opposed the creation of a commission, fearing that it would create a parallel process to the trials and conflict with the court's mandate (Moratti and Sabic-El Rayess 2009: 23). In the years to follow, several attempts to establish a truth commission were unsuccessful (ICTJ 2009: 2, ICTJ 2010: 1, 3, UNDP 2012: 24). The lack of a commission is one of the reasons why the number of war victims in B&H is still hard to determine. Reasonable estimates exist only due to the research of CSOs, which established that some 100'000 people were killed (Jones et al. 2014: 22). The three leading regional CSOs dealing with the issue are: the Humanitarian Law Center (Belgrade), Documenta (Zagreb), and the Research and Documentation Center (Sarajevo) (Bickford et al. 2009: 11).

drafting of an underlying law and the implementation of the National Strategy for Transitional Justice (which focuses on local truth-seeking initiatives) (ibid., Jones et al. 2014: 23).

- Until a commission is established, another approach is to **raise awareness about already existing research and documentation about the war**. CSOs have so far collected countless testimonies and published a large amount of reports. The general public is not sufficiently aware of this rich fund of knowledge. Another source of historical knowledge that can be capitalized on originates from academic research institutions (Kivimäki et al. 2012: 97-98, UNDP 2012: 9, 23).
- Finally, **supporting CSO initiatives such as RECOM** (Coalition for a Regional Commission for Establishing the Facts about War Crimes and other Serious Human Rights Violations in the former Yugoslavia) is promising. RECOM was established in 2008 by more than 100 CSOs from the former Yugoslavia. Its goal is to create an accurate record of past events (focusing especially on missing people) and to debunk myths and differing interpretations of the past (ICTJ 2010: 4-5, Jones et al. 2014: 23). The initiative is supported by the European Parliament (Dzidic 2013).

4.2 Reconciling Narratives

Three concrete strategies for reconciling diverging narratives and working towards a common interpretation of the past are proposed below. Beneficial for all approaches is the clear will of many citizens of B&H to discuss the past (also with other ethnic groups) and their readiness to seek answers and shared truths (UNDP 2012: 44).

- **Public Speaking Events** should be organised as a platform for citizens to share personal stories from the war in order to foster the acknowledgement of the suffering of others and increase the acceptance of alternative narratives. Ideally, the events include ex-combatants, who are sometimes surprisingly open to share their war experiences (Moratti and Sabic-El Rayess 2009: 33). Several international development organisations already perform or plan such events (such as CRS and Caritas Switzerland, see CRS 2012 and the 'Conflict Analysis').
- Instead of focusing exclusively on cleansing the political discourse of ethno-political narratives, Kivimäki et al. (2012) propose to **create public forums for principled,**

facts-based dialogue. Here, authoritative persons (religious and political leaders, intellectuals, media representatives) from all ethnic groups could debate interpretations of history and ethnic identities. Such forums would provide an alternative to the current political discourse and delegitimize one-sided narratives without factual foundations (ibid.: 97-98).

- Finally, **positive and connective narratives** that can be embraced by all ethnic groups should be promoted. A good example is the true story of Srdjan Aleksic, a young Bosnian Serb soldier from Trebinje (a city in the RS). In 1993, he stood up to a fellow group of soldiers who attacked a Bosniak friend of his. Aleksic saved his friend, but was himself beaten to death. His story is well-known in B&H and was recently depicted in the movie 'Krugovi' (*Circles*) (Remikovic 2011). The movie has been a success and was also shown at the Sarajevo Film Festival in 2013 where it was very well-received by the audience (Kurir 2013). The potential of such and similar connective narratives should be capitalized on: The Sarajevo-based Post-Conflict Research Center, for example, launched a Srdan Aleksic youth competition with the aim to galvanize youth to share their own stories of inter-ethnic cooperation, inspiration and heroism (Post-Conflict Research Center 2014).

4.3 Focusing on Youth

Focusing on youth is important, as young people are strongly affected by diverging narratives.

- First and foremost, **inter-ethnic interaction among children and young people** should be fostered in every possible way to enable them to cross-check (and correct) ethno-political narratives in direct contact with members of other ethnic groups. Strategies directed at youth can take the form of joint school projects, youth camps, youth centres and much more. In addition, opportunities should be increased for young people to inform themselves about the other ethnic communities (e.g. by creating a pan-ethnic national youth magazine) (Kivimäki et al. 2012: 98).
- Secondly, the **focus on youth should be cross-cutting** and young people should be included in all the described strategies (e.g. in the public speaking events).

5. Concluding Remarks

Even 19 years after the end of the war in B&H there is continued need for institutional reforms and reconciliation, and especially for addressing diverging narratives of war which represent an obstacle to positive peace in the country. This essay has shown that there are many strategies to counter ethno-political narratives, some of which should be further strengthened. Ideally, international development actors and local CSOs would join forces to make use of all possible strategies to:

- establish and disperse historical facts,
- to reconcile narratives by engaging in public speaking events, offering facts-based debates in forums and by focusing on connective narratives,
- and importantly, to put the young generation of B&H at the forefront of all reconciliation activities.

While public support for such efforts can be assumed, they might face a certain political opposition (as politicians use narratives for their own purposes). International development actors should therefore continue to bolster local initiatives especially in light of the current situation: the largest civil protests in 20 years might present a window of opportunity for reconciling ethnic divisions and creating common narratives in B&H.

6. Abbreviations

B&H	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia
RECOM	Coalition for a Regional Commission for Establishing the Facts about War Crimes and other Serious Human Rights Violations in the former Yugoslavia
RS	Republika Srpska
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

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