

Reconciliation in the Successor States of former Yugoslavia

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Continuing violence against Serbs in Kosovo, fighting between Albanian rebels and Macedonian soldiers in the border region between Macedonia and Kosovo. The Balkans are still a long way from peace. At the summit meeting between the Balkan states and the EU in Skopje in February, Bodo Hombach, the EU co-ordinator of the Balkans Stability Pact, claimed there was "a lack of desire" in the region for reconciliation but that regional co-operation is, nevertheless, now more within reach than ever before. So it was that, in conjunction to the summit, the neighbouring states Macedonia and Yugoslavia signed an agreement on the course of their mutual borders. This, claimed Yugoslavian President Vojislav Kostunica, demonstrated to the world that the Balkans region was quite capable of transforming itself from a trouble spot into an oasis of peace.

In Yugoslavia, too, parallel to the process of democratisation there has been a change in thinking. Now, according to the latest polls, a majority of the population is in favour of handing over ex-president Slobodan Milosevic to the UN war-crimes court in The Hague. The government in Belgrade is still resisting this extradition: if Milosevic and his helpers were found by the court to be the principal offenders in the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, then, as was the case with Germany after World War II, the Yugoslavs would be pilloried before the world as war-mongers.

Can the German experience after the war nevertheless be of some help? In February, a Serb-Croatian dialogue between writers and journalists aimed at reconciliation of both countries was held in Belgrade. The meeting was organised by the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (ifa) and the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in South Eastern Europe, Thessaloniki (CDRSEE), under the auspices of the German Press and Information Office (BPA) and the Greek foreign ministry. There, Alois Graf von Waldburg-Zeil, president of the ifa, traced Germany's steps along the path towards normalisation of its relationships with its neighbours. Alongside the maintenance of modesty of political ambition on the part of the young Federal Republic, it was, claimed the ifa president, above all "the neighbourly communal interests" which had led to the normalisation of relationships. Gestures such as Brandt's genuflection in Warsaw, too, though, had their effect.

Zagreb publisher Nenad Popovic believed that there could be only limited comparison between Germany's situation then and present day Yugoslavia, since Germany, with the help of the occupation forces, had gone through a process of denazification. Gestures, such as that of Brandt, are necessary nevertheless, as are the apologies from politicians to the victims of war. Only so could the trauma of the war be expunged. Hrvoje Glavac, Minister of state in Zagreb's Ministry of the Environment, agreed with Popovic that "elected politicians have the right to express themselves through gestures if they wish to."

Willy Brandt to order

Belgrade author Drinka Gojkovic, however, warned against adopting the use of "off-the-peg formulations". This would create only illusions, not least of which would be the illusion that the mere expression of regret released one from guilt. "We cannot simply order up a new Willy Brandt" said Gojkovic. It was, she said, much more important to address young people's interest in discussing their most recent history, and the task, with respect to that history, is one of demystification. "We have to address the question

of whether we wish to continue to describe the recent wars as something which they were not: defensive wars."

Gojkovic argued that it must be made clear that the wars were fought in defence of national interest, and that such clarification is hindered, particularly in Croatia, by the exalted myth of "the war for the homeland". The battle around the Croatian border town of Vukovar has been elevated to become part of the foundation myth of Croatia. Although it is unrealistic to believe that the war will be demystified in either Serbia or Croatia it is, according to Gojkovic, nevertheless the duty of intellectuals to create and supply "the moral software" which would enable such demystification. "Society is aware of its guilt," Gojkovic claims. What is important now "is to identify the facts about who the victims are and who the perpetrators" and to look into the question of which mechanisms in society led to the catastrophe.

The President of the Yugoslavian lawyers' committee for human rights, Biljana Kovacevic-Vuco, believed "the best form of apology" to be the extradition of war criminals to The Hague. Belgrade must, she said, co-operate with the Tribunal and pass a special law under which those accused of genocide must be extradited automatically. What is difficult, on the other hand, is ascertaining "who has to apologise to whom". First the archives must be opened, the crimes investigated and then results made available to the public.

A further problem is that, since the NATO attacks, no agreement on the amnesty for Serbian deserters has been drawn up. For reconciliation within the country, however, so the lawyer claims, it is essential "to find legal structures for living together". Popovic, however, saw in the "half-hysterical insistence by Western countries" on the extradition of Milosevic "an unnecessary burden" on a Serbia which was currently in the throes of constituting a state under the rule of law and normalising the justice system. "Why does it matter so much to the West that Milosevic is extradited? Was he not the West's partner?" Popovic asked. With regard to the development of the rule of law in Serbia, he argued that it surely would be "healthy if the dictator were to be put on trial here."

A lack of infrastructure

Dejan Ilic, from the radio station B92, favoured the setting up of a truth commission to bring light into the darkness of the recent past. This commission should be supported by non-governmental organisations. Only once the perpetrators had been reliably identified the public should be informed. "We have no facts on which to base apologies," Ilic said. After the war the Germans were fortunate enough to have had an "infrastructure" for denazification provided to them by the Americans. Help was, he said, also necessary in the states of the former Yugoslavia. The experience of Germany, Chile, or South Africa in dealing with their histories could be instructive.

The process of discovering the truth must be picked out as a central issue in the media and made transparent for the population. Investigative journalism and media databases would be essential to this end. Ilic, a radio-journalist, had discovered a desire among the citizens to talk about responsibility. In this they differed from the intellectuals and politicians who were very hesitant to face up to their responsibility.

Like Kovacevic-Vuco, the Belgrade historian Ljubrodrag Dimic demanded the opening of the archives to enable the clarification of recent history. This however could not be run by a "truth commission" but would have to be left to science. A matter of great urgency, he claimed, was the need to work on schoolbooks. In Croatian schoolbooks "there is not one single positive character from Serbia," and in Serbian schoolbooks the fruits of "the ideology of glossing over the old Yugoslavia" could be seen.

The editor in chief of the Belgrade news agency NIN, Stevan Niksic, wanted to know "why neither state-run nor independent institutions are involved in dialogue about the past." In contrast to Ilic, he sees the interest among the population as still insufficient. The population is too much afraid of the assignment of collective guilt. In both Serbia and Croatia only through dialogue "from above" will it be possible to achieve the breakdown of nationalism essential for the normalisation of relations. It is not yet "normal" within the region to trade freely in "intellectual goods." Thus, it is still, as before, almost impossible to purchase a Serbian newspaper in Zagreb. The aim now, Niksic argued, was to ensure the free trade of "intellectual goods" in order to break down the mutual isolation of the different parts of the region.

"A Slav with a Muslim name"

Writer Sinan Gudzevic, who lives in Zagreb, painted a vivid picture of the deep wounds the events of recent years have left behind. "Ten years ago I never spent a second wondering whether I was a Serb or a Croat," said the author, who describes himself as "a Slav with a Muslim name". Nowadays he needs a visa to visit his parents in Serbia. 200 000 people were killed in the war, 2 million were driven out of their homes because they belonged to the wrong ethnic group. "Serbia destroyed my life," said the 46-year-old, who spent his student years in Belgrade. The "extent of the catastrophe" could not, he claimed, be measured only by the extent of the killing. The starting point had in fact been the spreading of hate through the media, which led in turn to the poisoning of the whole political and intellectual climate. He himself had experienced "close up" how "intelligent people, poets, journalists had dedicated themselves to hate, and how a vocabulary of malice had been created."

Milosevic's remark from 1987, "No one will ever beat you again," was quoted everywhere. Thus, Gudzevic claimed, Milosevic has managed to instrumentalise for his own purposes the myth of Serbian martyrdom, a myth which has its origins in the Battle of Amsfeld: the feeling had grown among the Serbian people that Milosevic had "given them back their self-respect" and offered a way out of martyrdom.

Suddenly, in the previously lively bars of Belgrade there was now only whispering and "elitist intellectuals spread amongst the people the opinion that Serbia would be certain to gain by a war and certain to lose through peace." The war, Gudzevic claimed, had offered the intellectuals more of an opportunity to address political matters. And they took up their positions: the Serbian writers' association took the side of the Chetnik movement. Now there seems to be no "widespread and serious debate about that movement," Gudzevic complained, though there is urgent need for clarification with regard to their crimes, and for an unambiguous distancing from the aims and practices of the Chetniks. "What we must demand of people," said Gudzevic, "is honesty."

Abuse of the media

Kovacevic -Vuco pointed to the responsibility of the media and accused the state-run Yugoslavian television broadcaster RTS of operating as a "blind tool" of the Milosevic regime, broadcasting manipulated information and biased reports and so contributing to the wars of recent years. Within a very short period of time, the media were participating in the daily creation of fear and had produced an atmosphere which suggested imminent disaster.

Volker Fink, department director in the foreign department of the Federal Press and Information Office (BPA), had already, by way of introduction, reported on the activities of the Federal Press and Information Office within the framework of the stability pact for South Eastern Europe in the field of free pluralistic media landscape as the most important prerequisite for the creation and consolidation of democracy and stability in the region. Alongside the organisation of diverse media dialogues, among others on the subject of journalistic ethics, the BPA also assists in the creation of media in, for

example, Montenegro. In addition to this, the BPA offers further education workshops, for example, in Kosovo in television and radio management. With the creation of the "Balkan Media Academy" in Sofia, which owes its existence to German aid, there is now a training and communications centre open to journalists throughout the region.

Echoing Gudzevic's comments with regard to Serbia, the Zagreb theatre director Slobodan Snajder spoke of betrayal by intellectuals in Croatia. "There is nothing which did not also happen on the Croatian side," he said alluding to the "fall from grace" of the intellectuals in Croatia. They had "wanted the war" and for years had worked on its "intellectual preparation". Snajder put forward the question of how it was possible that in "these milieus some offered resistance while some offered none at all."

Until recently, in the face of the nationalistic rhetoric, he himself had, among his intellectual colleagues, felt like "Cassandra in a military camp gone mad." The arts were the very media whose role it was to make an issue of threatened conflicts and initiate a change of consciousness through which the danger of violent conflict could be dispelled. Snajder has a play in preparation in his theatre in Zagreb, which addresses the topic of war - and tries with the means at the disposal of theatre to look at and deal with the past. "We must introduce a process of catharsis once we have discovered exactly when which crime was committed where and by whom," said Snajder.

At the Belgrade meeting there was a certain diversity of opinion as to how great a role the intellectual elite had played in the recent disaster. Gudzevic believed there were enough examples to show that the population in the former Yugoslavia "demonstrated more tolerance than the elite" and had shown no inclination towards aggression towards their neighbours. There was no innate antagonism between the cultures. In Sandschak, where he was born, for example, Muslims and Serbs had lived together in peace like "egg yolk and egg white." While Gudzevic, for this reason, believed and argued that the intellectual elite had "set the people at each other's throats", Gojkovic argued that the intellectuals' role should not be overestimated. The intellectuals had not influenced the events of recent years in any decisive way. Glavac was also of this opinion. He had noticed that in South Eastern Europe there was a tendency among the intellectuals "to overestimate themselves."

Writers under threat

Popovic was no longer happy "to accept the dogma that the elite were evil and the people merely manipulated." One could often read, he claimed, that writers, more than anyone else, had whipped up hatred, and it was now a cliché to say "the more educated" one was "the more guilty" one was, too. In 1995 in Northern Dalmatia thousands of houses went up in flames and there was "massive collective criminality." "The crimes were not committed by small groups. There is no collective guilt, but there is guilt of the masses," said the Zagreb publisher. And it was the masses, too, who spoke of traitors and treason and so made life difficult for critical intellectuals. With respect to this, Popovic offered as an example the case of Bogdan Bogdanovic: This "great Serbian patriot" had, between 1987 and 1991, written a series of articles which expressed deep concern about Serbia and the rampant nationalism there. Today Bogdanovic lives in Vienna. "Someone had painted 'Ustasha' on the door of his house," Popovic claimed. In Croatia the author Slavenka Drakulic had made herself unpopular by writing critical articles and people had begun questioning the authenticity of her "Croatian descent". "The people simply believed that she was a traitor." Popovic had an explanation for the behaviour of the Croatians: "Mass movements require victims."

Bogdanovic and Drakulic are, like Popovic, founding members of "Gruppe 99" (Group 99), a band of writers from the former Yugoslavia who, in their foundation declaration at the 1999 Frankfurt Book Fair, expressed their opposition to any form of chauvinism which transforms political borders into borders between cultures. For the participating authors

their commitment was not without risk for them back home, and the coming together of the writers was viewed there with some suspicion. Indeed, the chairman of the Croatian writers association criticised the meeting sharply at the time.

Dimic made it clear that the origins of the Yugoslavian civil war reach far back into the history of the country. The founding of the Yugoslavian state through the union of Serbia and Montenegro with the regions which had until then belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire to create "The Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenians" was, Dimic said, "the result of a world war". In that war 400,000 Croatian soldiers had fought on the side of Austria-Hungary. The war also claimed the lives of one million Serbs. To the disagreements between Serbs and Croats which arose from the foundation of the state, King Alexander I reacted with an authoritarian regime based on the army, and introduced a policy of "levelling by force". The heterogeneity of the population, with a "mosaic of cultural factors" went unrecognised by the elite. Instead, according to Dimic, a "clerical-fascism with ideological pressure" increased the factors contributory to the disintegration of the Yugoslavian state. Serbian cultural clubs began to discuss "the Serbian question". In World War II there was participation by the Ustasha in Nazi atrocities: with the creation of an independent Croatian state came ethnic cleansing "which may certainly be called genocide." Over 1.9 million people were driven out of Croatia during that time. The communist movement, too, came out of the war, and that movement propagated the idea of a new Yugoslavia based on "equality of the peoples, and so promoted further misunderstandings."

The end of a utopia

According to Dimic, behind the hackneyed words "fraternity and unity" genocide was hidden. For forty years, centralism and the omnipotence of the party ensured that a true investigation of, for example, the Chetnik and Ustasha movements was prevented. Furthermore, through the intimidation of intellectuals, a culture of fear spread which encouraged the manipulation of numbers, for example those on ethnic origin.

Finally, a deceptive prosperity in the 70s hid the comprehensive system-crisis in the multi-ethnic Yugoslavian state, a state in which the communist party had no desire to relinquish its monopoly on power.

Kuvacevic -Vuco remembered the "claustrophobic feeling" back then, arising from the absence of democracy, a state of affairs which, given the ever recurring idealisation of "old Yugoslavia", is often edited from memory. But at that time she did not think that a multi-party system could be realised since this would, she believed, have led to a fragmentation of the country. Glavac saw Yugoslavia's principal problem as the fact that "that state was an illusion and for that reason never brought forth an elite of liberal individuals who might have prevented fragmentation." Furthermore, there was no market economy which might have enabled economic and social modernisation. The country went down a dead end street, from which it couldn't return.

The whole gathering of writers and journalists was unanimous in believing that the undemocratic nature and the ideological rigidity of the former Yugoslavian system hindered an open and constructive debate on national questions and on the war. This had led to a comprehensive crisis, which in turn led to a situation in which each nation of the multi-ethnic society felt itself to be a victim, and it was this which laid the ground and made the way clear for Slobodan Milosevic at the end of the 80s. "We fought about top-victim status," claimed Gojkovic, and this opened the door to the legitimisation of war. In the course of this, Belgrade propaganda played up and so strengthened Serbian fears of a repeat of genocide - fears which stemmed from their experiences in World War II - and this was done irrespective of whether, after the end of Communism, there was any real basis for such fears.

"It is clear that those present have no need to be reconciled," Jens Reuter, director of the CDRSEE had said at the beginning of the conference. Many of the writers and journalist knew each other from Belgrade when that city was, as the Croat Glavac remembered, still a "mystical place" which one was pleased to visit. Gudcevic said the meeting was "the first for years at which the talking had been honest."

And while the writer demanded that "Europe must set up three television stations in order to report on and discuss the crimes of the past years," Galvac, now a politician, asked for a general "calming of discussion." There was nothing unique about the recent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, and so they should be "judged pragmatically". He, just like Gudzevic, felt "melancholy when he thought of his own youth in former Yugoslavia." But now it was important to look to the future, to start modernising the region and through "everyday processes" - i.e. political and economic normalisation - to overcome the differences between Serbs and Croats. For there was a lesson to learn from the demise of "old Yugoslavia": without such development, all roads are dead ends.