

What Future for the Past?

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International conference “Bad Memories. Sites, Emblems and Narrations of Wars in the Balkans” organized by the *Observatory on the Balkans (Osservatorio sui Balcani)* in the field of the project sponsored by the Directorate-General for Education and Culture of the European Commission

Rovereto, Peace Bell Foundation Center
November 9, 2007

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Introduction

Speaking about the past — more essentially, how we speak about the past — shapes the future of a country, this is too often forgotten. Thus, I want to try to approach the issue of the conference from this viewpoint. Starting with lessons from Europe’s recent past.

Today is the 9th November, quite a symbolic date for Europe and for the Western Balkans too.

As you probably know about “Kristallnacht” — “the night of broken glass” — what a terrible *euphemism* for Nazi Germany’s large-scale and brutal *pogrom*, took place at 9th November 1938. This barbaric day symbolizes the darkest chapter of European History in the 20th century, culminating in the Holocaust.

61 years later, in 1989 — it was again a 9th Nov — the Berlin wall came down. The GDR opened checkpoints in the Berlin Wall, allowing its citizens to freely travel to West Germany. Spontaneous “People power” started demolishing the Berlin Wall, the symbol of Cold War Europe. A new chapter in European history was thus opened; some even envisioned “The End of History”.

Roughly around this time, not far away from the demolished Berlin Wall, on the territory of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, a fundamental crisis of the state system, combined with a breakdown of intra-society communication had come near to its culmination. Within a few weeks time an implosion of unprecedented dimensions swept away the foundations of this state... At its 14th Congress the once all-powerful League of Communists of Yugoslavia dissolved along Republic and ethnic lines. The bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia began.

This crisis in the southeastern region of our continent soon turned into a big crisis for the European integration project. Europe failed to act adequately and consistently; consequently the much-touted “Hour of Europe” (Luxemburg’s Foreign Minister Poos) triggered one of the worst crises in post cold war Europe.

Yet another “anniversary”: On the 9th of November 1993, “Stari Most”, Mostar’s magnificent “Old Bridge”, built in 1566 by the Ottomans, collapsed after several days of bombing by Croat forces. (The General in charge presently stands trial in The Hague’s ICTY). The traces of the Berlin Wall are mostly gone, Germany is re-united; Bosnia’s destroyed physical infrastructure is more or less rebuilt, so is the bridge in Mostar.

Questions, however, remain: Has trust between the ethnic communities been rebuilt, is “truth and reconciliation” on the political agenda, have the root-causes of the conflict been addressed by the political elites and by civil society? Questions abound... and there are no easy answers... All in all, the record is not encouraging so far...

Is thus the time ripe for “truth and reconciliation”? Are the people, affected by a traumatic civil war, ready to really engage in the necessary soul searching? As the European experience of the twentieth century shows — rebuilding a bridge, a house, is mainly a matter of money. Thus, physical reconstruction, overcoming the worst destruction can start immediately — and so it did in the Balkans... However, rebuilding trust between the former warring parties and finding a way to deal with the divided past in a constructive way needs time and effort. It needs much time and continuous efforts of all parties and actors involved in the process, it requires enormous political will and the readiness on the part of both the elites and the so-called ordinary people for self-reflexion and self-criticism.

Lessons from Europe

Looking at the lessons coming from the dark side of Europe’s history, the examples of Germany, Austria, Spain clearly demonstrate how different the way from dictatorship to democracy can be. While the German and Austrian examples are better known, Spain is lesser studied — and is, above all, quite different. Only a few days ago the 40-year dictatorship of Spain's General Franco has been formally condemned by the democratically elected parliament in Madrid.

The Spanish fascist dictator Franco died in 1975. Yet after his death and the transition to democracy there was no purge, but rather an officially sanctioned exercise in collective amnesia. Spain’s fascist past, the civil war and its thousands of victims — this all was subordinated to the peaceful transition to democratic rule and economic recovery. In the Spanish case this ‘pact of oblivion’ was made by elites in order to ensure political stability, fearing that any attempt to sully the reputation of Franco and purge the military and security forces would lead to a destabilizing crisis of the divided Spanish society.

It took the Spanish parliament more than 30 years to approve a highly controversial “historical memory” law which acknowledges in the most comprehensive form to date the atrocities of the Franco regime. Only now all symbols of the fascist regime from 1936-75 are ordered to be removed from public buildings. Local authorities are obliged to search for mass graves from the 1930s Civil War. Finally, official “recognition” of Franco’s victims is possible in Spain. This is said to spell a new start for the country.

The Spanish example — if taken as such — clearly demonstrates that the process of confronting the past and overcoming the ghosts of history first of all needs time. But time alone cannot heal the wounds — this is another lesson from the Yugoslav tragedy. Confronting the past needs a proper environment, needs a stable state and dedicated political stakeholders like current Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who, it seems, is ready to free Spain from the lingering wounds of its past.

This effort is also intrinsically linked to the socio-economic progress in the country itself. Present-day Spain is a well to do society — in spite of all its problems between the main “ethnic communities”. Obviously, politics has managed to balance the tricky equilibrium between the various groups. Clearly, membership in the EU, not the least substantial financial support from Brussels, has provided the framework for a successful transformation.

In short: The success story of the EU has changed the parameters for the political classes in Europe and created a framework for active involvement in the politics of overcoming civil wars with its concomitant consequences of political division and economic underdevelopment.

Facing the Past in the Western Balkans

In the countries of the Western Balkans the process of coming to terms with the past has not yet begun. The Western Balkans' societies are still waiting for a fresh beginning, an impetus that Spain got when it was accepted into the European integration process in spite of its fascist ghosts of the past. The reasons in the states of former Yugoslavia are obvious. Unresolved status issues (Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina) belated state building, re-negotiations of the national question, political instrumentalisation of the past, political elites engaged in the expansion of its power-base, in short, an enduring socio-political crisis and frustrated search for "identity".

There are some rather manifest contextual factors that affect the extent to which political class and people in the Western Balkans consider facing-the-past-processes trustworthy and legitimate. Those factors range from the shape of the post-war environment and the extent to which people believe to deal with the past benefits them, to the degree of trust people have in the state and in politics. It is compounded with a pervasive feeling that their "collective being" is under threat. A careful examination of the status of the Western Balkans societies after the crisis of the 1990s shows that most of the contextual factors mentioned above are overly detrimental to the necessary process of healing:

- The post-war environment is still dominated by ethno-nationalist argumentation and mistrust in "The Other".
- Most of the people do not really believe that facing the past will bring them any benefits or change their dismal status; they thus stick to divisive narratives and self-victimisation.
- The degree of trust people have in the state and political class after more than 15 years of "politics imposed on people's everyday lives" is rather small.
- In the environment where "The Others" (Albanians, Bosniacs, Croats, Serbs; not to speak of the Roma) are still demonized, the irrational fear of "losing its own identity" is prevalent.

From Political Instrumentalisation Towards a "Re-politisation of the Memory"

Let me also mention the political instrumentalisation of the issue. Over the past years we could observe in Central Europe — notably in Poland — the tendency for a new — and highly problematic — way of ideological "house cleaning". New and constitutionally dubious efforts were under way to get rid of the remnants of the old communist elites, who — really or allegedly — took advantage of the tumultuous (and indeed problematic) transition from communist rule to democracy and market economy. An "Institute for National Remembrance" (but barely based on the rule of law) promotes "national values", thereby espousing authoritarian methods and nationalist rhetoric.

This is but one illustration of the fact, that even successful European integration does not automatically guarantee the abuses of history for sinister political gains. No doubt, a set of stringent rules, based on European (and thus universal) values (Copenhagen Criteria, European and UN Human Rights and other relevant Covenants) which take into account the specificities and sensitivities of Europe's diverse ethno-linguistic set-up could help remedy the situation.

After a war, with its unspeakable atrocities and — in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina — genocide,

there is an (understandable) tendency to exclusively reduce the past to those gruesome facts. The “victimisation of history” would be as wrongheaded as mere oblivion. We deeply appreciate the desperation of the victims, their need to be listened to, the recognition of the suffering and, above all, the necessity to bring the perpetrators to justice. However, the exclusive focus on the atrocities and the suffering may contribute to a certain “de-politisation” in post-conflict societies. It is again the context which matters. The broader picture, not the least a clear perspective on the future, is needed in order to avoid repetition; to give sense to history and, last but not least, to make reconciliation feasible.

This is the point where politics is back in the game, why a novel form of confronting the past at the political level — a sort of “re-politisation of the memory” — is needed.

For leaving the pain and trauma of the past behind and approaching reconciliation in a deeper sense of the word — to establish a new narrative — it is inevitable to address the structures of political power, inequality and exclusion that constituted the framework within which the violence of the old order was both perpetrated and endured.

Ordinary people can start to move towards a shared future only if their everyday life stops to constantly reminding them of the pain of the past. Only if political stakeholders stop reinventing and manipulating the past for its own purposes will they create conditions for reconciliation... For people to move together along the path of reconciliation it is crucial that a sustained effort is made to transform the structures and circumstances of everyday life that embody and perpetuate the old divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between perpetrator and victim. Only when people feel that the evils of the past will not return and believe that ‘things are moving in the right direction’ will they be in a position to loosen the bonds of the past, relinquish the impulse for revenge and re-adjust towards the future.

To make this possible a proper political framework has to be established, including stable statehood, a functioning economy, and accountable politicians. Without the latter there cannot be expected that the necessary transformation of everyday life will be sustainable.

The need for a constructive “politisation of the memory” as a way to bypass widespread tactics of manipulation of the past for short-term aims — as is still the case in the Western Balkans — has one crucial limit: the political elites themselves! As long as irresponsibility and egotism, ethno-nationalist-argumentation, and well-directed misuse of the past based on the principle of constant accusations of the “others” for all the ills remain the striking characteristics of Western Balkans’ politics, there will be no offensive and true confrontation of the past. The many ghosts from the past are still haunting around.

Searching for the Coexistence of Past and Future — Concluding Remarks

Let me sum up by formulating some general thoughts about the past! The ‘past’ is not something fixed with an independent existence, a once and for all set of events. The ‘past’ is the remembered past, and as such it is something that is constructed and reproduced in a multitude of ways. In other words, what we refer to as the ‘past’ is our historical memory of a particular period of the past, and our particular memory is just one of a range of alternative memories (or interpretations) that it is possible to hold. So, by ‘dealing with the past’ we are referring to an individual process comparable to that of forgiveness.

Thus individual revisiting of the past remains essential. Exploring the deeper worlds of our memories and giving our best to understand the fears and prejudices we have, requires self-criticism, courage and intellectual perseverance. But at the end it is only by confronting ourselves with the content of our fears and prejudices that enables us to become conscious of our past and by doing so to think more freely about our future.

Only the coexistence of Past and Future can guarantee a normal present, a present in which the past is seen as a positive part of its own memory, and where the future is seen as a common place for all citizens. Ignorance, prejudice, fear and the inability for honest communication and meaningful dialogue are ingredients for new confrontations — rhetorical and real.

“The Past” is a construct, let’s de-construct it in order to build a common European future with a common narrative...