



**Sarajevo  
Geneva  
Vienna**

# **Center for European Integration Strategies**

**WORKING PAPER SERIES  
No 1 / 2009**

**WHAT FUTURE FOR THE PAST?  
MOVING ON REQUIRES LOOKING BACK**

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**21 JANUARY 2009**

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**21 January 2009**

### ***What Future For The Past? Moving On Requires Looking Back***

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#### **Abstract**

As the physical infrastructure is now more or less rebuilt throughout the Balkans, questions, however, remain: Has trust and reconciliation between the *ethnic communities* been re-established, has the search for truth become part of the national agenda, have the root-causes of the conflict been addressed by the political elites and by civil society? All in all, the record of dealing with the past is not encouraging at all. Of course, rebuilding trust and finding a way to deal with the now disjointed narratives in a constructive way needs effort and even more time.

Lessons from Europe illustrate 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. Confronting the past obviously requests also a proper socio-economic environment. Last but not least, membership in the EU has enhanced the economic and political framework for a successful transformation.

The reasons, why this process has not yet begun in the Balkans are quite obvious. Unresolved status issues, belated state building, pervasive political instrumentalisation of the past, political elites exclusively engaged in the expansion of their power-base; an enduring transformation-crisis and a frustrated search for *identity* lie at the center of the slow process. This is the point where democratic and accountable politics is back in the game, and the reason why a novel form of confronting the past at a distinctly political level – a sort of *re-politisation of the memory* – is needed.

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It seems to be a truism these days to state, that speaking about the past, more importantly, *how* we speak about the past, shapes the future of our societies. “Dealing with the past and implementing meaningful reconciliation processes in the Western Balkans” should be approached from this vantage point. Let me start with lessons from Europe’s recent past.

November 9 is a date of truly historic proportions for Europe and – in a different yet related way – for the Western Balkans as well. Some 70 years ago the so-called *Kristallnacht* took place – what a terrible euphemism for Nazi Germany’s large-scale and systematic pogrom against Jewish citizens, their possessions and synagogues. Those barbaric events symbolize the darkest chapter of European history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This pogrom led straight into the Shoah. In 1989 – it was again a November Ninth – the Berlin wall came down. The moribund German Democratic Republic was forced to open ‘checkpoints’ through the Berlin Wall, allowing its citizens to spontaneously visit West Germany. People power seized the moment and started to literally tear down the Wall, the symbol of the divided Europe. A new chapter in European, even in world history, was thus opened; some even envisioned the ‘End of History’, the ultimate victory of Western liberal democracy.

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 communist state system, was unfolding triggered by a breakdown of intra-society communication. Within a few weeks’ time an implosion of unprecedented dimensions swept away the foundations of this state. At its 14<sup>th</sup> Congress – held in January 1990 – the once all-powerful League of Communists of Yugoslavia split along Republic lines. The bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia had thus begun. This conflict in the southeastern region of our continent soon turned into a big crisis for the European integration project. Europe failed to act decisively and consistently. As we know now, the much-touted “Hour of Europe” (to quote Luxemburg’s Foreign Minister and acting President of the European Community at that time, Jacques Poos) was in fact the beginning of the worst conflict since 1945 in Europe. Yet another ‘anniversary’: Fifteen years ago, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 1993, *Stari Most*, Mostar’s magnificent ‘Old Bridge’, built in 1566 by the Ottomans, collapsed after several days of shelling by Croat forces. (The General in charge presently stands trial at The Hague’s International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia). The traces of the Berlin Wall are mostly gone, Germany is reunited; Bosnia and Herzegovina’s destroyed physical infrastructure is more or less rebuilt, so is the bridge in Mostar.

Questions, however, remain: Has trust and reconciliation between the ethnic communities been re-established, has the search for truth become part of the national 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. *Grosso modo*, I should say, the record of dealing with the past is not encouraging at all. We thus have to ask ourselves: Is now – almost 20 years after the start of the Yugoslav tragedy – the time ripe for genuine truth and reconciliation? Are people, affected by a traumatic civil war, ready to really engage in the necessary soul searching?

As the European experience of the twentieth century clearly demonstrates, rebuilding a bridge, a house, the physical infrastructure of cities and whole countries is mainly a matter of money and resolve. Thus, physical reconstruction, overcoming the worst destruction, re-engaging the survivors in every-day-chores, can – I would even say must – start immediately in a post-conflict society – and so it did in the Balkans.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Keynote addresses on 10 November 2008 at the international symposium *Dealing with the past and reconciliation processes in the Western Balkans* Vienna (10-11 November 2008), organized by the Institut für den Donauraum und Mitteleuropa (IDM), the Center for European Integration Strategies (CEIS) and Osservatorio Balcani.

However, rebuilding trust between the former warring parties – between neighbors who knew each other from before the break-up, who basically speak the same language, grew up and were educated in the same system – and finding a way to deal with the now divided past in a constructive way needs time and effort. It needs much time and continuous efforts of all parties and actors involved in this cumbersome process. It above all requires enormous political will and the readiness on the part of both the elites and the citizenry for critical reflexion, combined with a quantum of self-criticism.

### *Lessons from Europe*

Looking at the lessons coming from the dark side of Europe's history – Germany, Austria, Spain – clearly demonstrates how different the way from dictatorship to democracy can be. While the German and Austrian examples are better known, and rightly so, Spain is lesser studied – and is, above all, tellingly different.

Only about a year ago – in November 2007 – the forty-year dictatorship of Spain's General Franco has been formally condemned by the democratically elected parliament in Madrid. General Franco, the fascist dictator of Spain, died in 1975. Yet after his death and the successful transition to democracy, Spain did not engage in a systematic soul searching or even in the most basic purges, for that matter. It rather engaged in an officially sanctioned *exercise in collective amnesia*. Spain's fascist past, the civil war and its 40.000 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 the 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 then all symbols of the fascist regime from 1936-75 were ordered to be removed from public buildings. Since then local authorities are obliged to search for mass graves from the 1936-39 Civil War. Finally, official recognition of Franco's victims was possible. This is said to have spelled 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 yet another lesson from the Yugoslav tragedy. Confronting the past – as in the case of Spain exemplified – obviously needs a proper socio-economic environment. It 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 courageous effort is also intrinsically linked to the overall 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' and the current economic crisis. Obviously, politics has managed to balance the tricky equilibrium between the various national, ethnic and political groupings, between past and present.

Clearly, membership in the European Union, not the least a continued substantial financial support from Brussels, has provided the economic framework for a successful transformation. Generally speaking: The success story of EU-membership has changed the parameters for the political class in Europe at large and created a framework for active involvement in the politics of managing – if not overcoming – the consequences of civil war and ethnics conflict with its concomitant consequences of political dysfunction and continued 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, I dare to say, has not yet really 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 lingering fascist ghosts.

The reasons, why this process has not yet begun in the states of former Yugoslavia are quite obvious. Unresolved status issues (Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina), belated state building, re-negotiations of the national question, pervasive political instrumentalisation of the past, political elites exclusively engaged in the expansion of their power-base; in short, an enduring transformation-crisis and a frustrated search for 'identity' lie at the center of the slow process.

There are some rather manifest contextual factors that affect the extent to which the political class and the citizenry 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 that to deal with the past benefits them personally. Those factors are also affected by the degree of trust people have in their state and in politics in general. 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 multiple crises 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 influenced by ethno-nationalist argumentation and mistrust in *the other*.
- Most of the citizens do not really believe that facing the past will bring them any benefits or change their dismal social and economic status; consequently they stick to divisive narratives and self-victimisation.
- Finally, the degree of trust people have in the state and its representatives is still rather small.
- In the environment where the *local others* (be they Albanians, Bosniacs, Croats, Serbs; not to speak of the Roma) are still demonized, the irrational fear of *losing its own identity* is prevalent.

Over the past years we had to observe in Central Europe – notably in Poland – the tendency for a renewed – and highly dubious – way of ideological *house cleaning*. Politically motivated 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* 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 exclude the abuses of history for sinister political gains.

No doubt, a set of stringent rules, based on European criteria (the EU Copenhagen Criteria, Council of Europe and United Nations Human Rights and other relevant Covenants) which take into account the specificities and sensitivities of Europe's diverse ethno-linguistic set-up and regional traditions, could indeed 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 also contribute to an unwelcome *de-politisation* in post-conflict societies. Again it is the context which matters. The broader picture, not the least a clear perspective on the future, is needed in order to avoid vacuous repetition. An open and critical mind is also needed to give sense to history and, last but not least, to make reconciliation feasible. This is the point where democratic and accountable politics is back in the game, and the reason why a novel form of confronting the past at a distinctly political level – a sort of *re-politisation of the memory* – is needed.

In order to leave the pain and trauma of the past behind and to approach reconciliation in a deeper sense of the word – to establish an inclusive narrative – it is inevitable to address the structures of political power, social 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 their 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 undertaken 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, the Rule of Law and Justice, 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 well understood *politisation of the memory* as a way to bypass widespread tactics of manipulation of the past for short-term gains, 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 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 open and true confrontation of the past.

### ***In Search of the Coexistence of Past and Future***

The past is not something fixed and endowed 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 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. Our particular memory is just one of a range of alternative memories (or interpretations) that are possible to hold. Consequently, 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 a self-critical approach, courage and intellectual perseverance. But in 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 – forgetting and remembering – can guarantee a decent 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 all 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 yet diversified European narrative.

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He has authored *Bosnien und Herzegowina 5 Jahre nach Dayton: Hat der Friede eine Chance?* (Klagenfurt: Wieser Verlag, 2007 [2001]); *Kosovo-Kosova: Der lange Weg zum Frieden* (Klagenfurt: Wieser, 2005 [2004], with Robert Pichler); and *Das Kreisky-Prinzip: Im Mittelpunkt der Mensch* (Vienna: Czernin Verlag, 2009, with Margaretha Kopeinig). He co-edited with Christophe Solioz *Regional Cooperation in South East Europe and Beyond: Challenges and Prospects* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2008).

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