



## Introduction. Reconciliation in the Western Balkans: New Perspectives and Proposals

Cyril Blondel, Antonija Petričušić

### ► To cite this version:

Cyril Blondel, Antonija Petričušić. Introduction. Reconciliation in the Western Balkans: New Perspectives and Proposals. Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe, European Centre for Minority Issues, 2012, 11 (4), pp.1-6. halshs-01727610

HAL Id: halshs-01727610

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01727610>

Submitted on 9 Mar 2018

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

---

## **Introduction - Reconciliation in the Western Balkans: New Perspectives and Proposals**

Antonija Petričušić and Cyril Blondel\*

*University of Zagreb and University of Tours*

Dealing with a legacy of war crimes and human rights violations is a common challenge in post-conflict societies. This is particularly the case in the Western Balkan countries in which, as Sisson (2010: 172) puts it, a “decade of internecine war in the region had left behind not only a terrible legacy of human losses and material destruction, but also an unprecedented level of traumatization among the population at large, which contributed to a widespread and generalized sense of victimhood on all sides of the conflict”. The violent conflicts cemented deep ethnic cleavages that were, as a result of peace settlements, mirrored in institutional mechanisms, which further contributed to a preservation of ethnic divides. Post-conflict integrative normative solutions, such as assurance of minority participation in public life and power-sharing mechanisms, have contributed to the re-emergence of cooperation and, to a certain degree, to the normalization of relations between different ethnic communities across the region. However, the guarantee of minority rights means little for interethnic rapprochement and the reduction of the social distance between formerly warring communities if policy makers hold that minority legislation should merely allow for the preservation of minority identities and assure proportional political participation in decision-making processes. In a post-conflict scenario policy-makers should also

---

\*Antonija Petričušić is a Lecturer and Research Assistant at the Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb. Email: [antonija.petricusic@pravo.hr](mailto:antonija.petricusic@pravo.hr). Cyril Blondel is a PhD Candidate in Politics at the Research Centre for Cities, Territories, Environment and Societies (CITERES) and a Teaching Assistant in Urban and Regional Planning at the Polytechnic School of the University of Tours, France. Email: [cyrblondel@yahoo.fr](mailto:cyrblondel@yahoo.fr).

focus on the rectification of ethnic homogenization and the increase of interethnic tolerance. In addition, advanced normative frameworks on minority protection in the Western Balkans can only be effectively used if accompanied with a thorough implementation and support by political actors at all levels of governance, which still is not a case in the majority of the countries that were involved in the conflict. This brings the conclusion that current domestic normative and institutional mechanisms are not yet sufficient to foster reconciliation and the systemic acceptance of tolerance.

The internationalization of transitional justice, societal reconstruction and reconciliation, which is being pursued through the EU Stabilization and Accession Process, serves as the most promising incentive for the enhancement of post-conflict reconciliation in the region (Rupnik, 2007). The (potential) candidate countries in the Western Balkans are being exposed to a threefold post-conflict conditioning. The first part of conditionality entails the normative-institutional requirement set in the Copenhagen criterion requiring “respect for and protection of minority rights”. The second component of conditionality, aimed at the systematic elimination of impunity for war crimes and human rights abuses, requires the (potential) candidate countries’ commitment to judicial prosecution of war crimes in domestic criminal courts and cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Finally, the third component of the conditionality requires the countries of the region to, *inter alia*, foster reconciliatory efforts through the return of refugees, by settling disputes over property rights and compensating refugees, by developing neighbourly relations and regional cooperation, establishing truth and reconciliation commissions, and through public apologies by political leaders. By insisting on reforming and building these societal structures, the EU is, in a way, exporting the values upon which it has been built on: peace, reconciliation, democracy, rule of law and respect of human rights, including the rights of national minorities.

In the course of the EU accession, a (potential) candidate country is expected to foster a spirit of tolerance towards its minorities and take appropriate measures to protect those who are subjected to threats or acts of discrimination, hostility or violence. War crime trials should have provided accountability and individualized guilt, since the truth-finding component of this transitional justice mechanism had the objective of contributing to the creation of a climate of trust that would facilitate reconciliation. However, the ICTY is widely perceived as unfair, partial and unobjective by people in the former Yugoslavia. The lack of popular trust in the ICTY

failed to result in the building of interpersonal trust. The rather limited results in post-conflict societal reconstruction, of which the ICTY is just an example, might be explained by the fact that they are mainly reconciliatory attempts triggered and supported by foreign donors. Probably the most comprehensive “mechanistic international requirement” (Subotić, 2009: xii) was set up in the objective of the ICTY to “contribute to the restoration and maintenance of peace”. However, in the everyday life of Western Balkans citizens, this particular transitional justice and reconciliation mechanism resulted in even negative societal effects since its mandate was not explained as legitimate and necessary to the electorate by domestic political elites. Moreover, submission to international demands has often threatened political elites’ domestic credibility and weakened their domestic political competition (Meernik, Nichols and King, 2010; Grodsky, 2009; Minow, 2008; Peskin, 2008). Commitment to transitional justice and reconciliatory goals therefore often came at the cost of reformist political options.

With the exception of a few high political figures and civil society organizations, the “R” word is left out of public discourse, and is almost not present in the media or in the educational process. Needless to say, continuous denial of war crimes by some senior politicians on all sides seriously undermines reconciliation (Spoerri, 2012; Subotić, 2009). Nationalist politicians claim that, in order for them to speak about reconciliation, a preceding demonstration of good-will intentions from the side of a former enemy is needed, *i.e.* an apology by a former enemy for wrongdoings, recognition and compensation for casualties and destruction of property, accepting responsibility for war crimes and their thorough prosecution and/or financial restitution of war damages. The discourse on victimhood - which **Daniela Mehler** describes in her article as a trend of “patriotic voices” of those who require the recognition of victim status for their own group, with a parallel emotional detachment for victims of a different ethnicity - can be spotted across the region and leads to the conclusion that reconciliation efforts have not yet taken roots in the Balkans. This “gap between people and politics” in embracing reconciliatory stances has already been documented (Perry, 2009), and that missing link, *i.e.* the absence of reconciliatory aspirations on the side of the wider population, hampers the emergence of transformative change in the societies in question.

This volume demonstrates that different conceptualizations of post-conflict reconciliation are not only possible, but also necessary (Moreau Defarges, 1999).

Drawing on the concepts and discourses of reconciliation presented in this volume, reconciliation can be defined as a long-term goal of the post-conflict transformation of societies. All countries of the Western Balkans that were involved in the inter-ethnic conflicts are hereby included in the analysis: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia. The authors assumed different stances in analyzing successes and constraints in post-conflict reconciliation: political, symbolic, private, and systemic. The various conceptual approaches offered in this volume aim at providing new perspectives for reconciliation in the Western Balkans.

**Lars Burema**'s distinction between the backward-looking element of reconciliation (*i.e.* dealing with the past) and its forward-looking element (*i.e.* the building of trust) is reflected in all articles of this volume. Burema describes the constraints of reconciliation in Kosovo. Whereas territory in northern Kosovo is still contested between Serbia and Kosovo, the Serbs and Albanians in southern Kosovo have established a form of non-violent coexistence. Burema however argues that coexistence in southern Kosovo is built on separation rather than inclusion and cooperation, since for genuine reconciliation a cessation of conflict is insufficient if not followed by an agreement between the conflicting parties on the basic rules of dialogue.

**Cvete Koneska** argues that political elites are those who play a crucial role in post-conflict politics and the preservation of a fragile peace, and explores their interaction and cooperation in setting up a post-conflict education policy in Macedonia. This issue has turned out to be one of the most controversial policy issues straining relations between the ethnic Albanian minority and the Macedonian state since the early 1990s. In addition, Koneska argues that the institutional and constitutional system adopted after the 2001 conflict has enhanced interethnic elite cooperation in Macedonia, but has not contributed significantly to the elimination of ethnic cleavages at the local level.

**Ankica Kosić** and **Stefano Livi** explore socio-psychological factors that may facilitate reconciliation among youth. Their research, conducted in the city of Vukovar in Croatia, deals with the perceived parental communication of surveyed students, conflict management styles present within their families, young people's sense of victimhood, and their propensity toward reconciliation. Interestingly, results show that negative intergroup emotions are more likely among young persons who experienced material and personal losses, but this is not hampering their willingness

to accept social relationships with young people from another ethnic group. This research adds new evidence to the importance of parental roles in the propensity toward reconciliation.

**Sukanya Krishnamurthy** approaches post-conflict research in a different way. She explores the role that architecture or form plays in forming urban memory and forgetting by examining the urban palimpsest that is the Old Bridge in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina. She draws on the results of qualitative fieldwork in the city to establish a framework analyzing the site through two axes: one as an object seeped in history and commemoration, and the other through its representation as a monument for reconciliation – pre-destruction, post-destruction, and in its reconstruction as a replica of the original bridge. The article shows that an urban artefact enables interaction with a site of memory and connection to a collective past.

**Cilian Mc Grattan**'s article is based on an assumption that truth and reconciliation processes in post-conflict societies enhance the consolidation of democracy. He compares two ethnicized democracies – Northern Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina – arguing that consociational power-sharing structures have effectively institutionalized division and that the deconstruction of ethnicity in deeply divided societies of this kind can start merely with a commitment to openness by political elites. As long as ethnonationalist forces do not foster an increase of social capital, the re-building of trust, a variable much needed for reconciliation in a post-conflict society, will not take place.

**Daniela Mehler** analyzes the 2010 Serbian parliamentary debate on the declaration condemning the 1995 massacre in Srebrenica. Former President Tadić's initiative to adopt a parliamentary resolution on this war crime stirred a public debate that revealed the depth of public denial for atrocities committed by Serbs and the refusal to face the country's role in recent history. Mehler speaks about a normative gap that occurs in Serbia, where declaratory support for transitional justice by the government and members of parliament is not being backed by the population. Mehler further argues that Serbian stakeholders have internalized concepts of transitional justice and facing the past, ascribing to them a different meaning in order to utilize them for their own political goals, both domestic and international. The fact that the current President of Serbia Tomislav Nikolić publicly denied genocide in Srebrenica confirms the author's arguments.

**References**

Grodsky, B. 'International Prosecutions and Domestic Politics: The Use of Truth Commissions as Compromise Justice in Serbia and Croatia' *International Studies Review* 11(4) (2009): 687-706.

Meernik, J. D., A. Nichols, and K. L. King. 'The Impact of International Tribunals and Domestic Trials on Peace and Human Rights after Civil War' *International Studies Perspectives* 11 (2010): 309–334.

Minow, M. 'Making History or Making Peace: When Prosecutions Should Give Way to Truth Commissions and Peace Negotiations' *Journal of Human Rights* 7 (2008): 174–185.

Moreau Defarges, P. *Repentance et Réconciliation*. Paris : Presses de Sciences Po, 1999.

Perry, V. 'A Survey of Reconciliation Processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Gap Between People and Politics'. In *Reconciliation(s): Transitional Justice in Postconflict Societies*, ed. J.R. Quinn, 207–231. Montreal: McGill University Press, 2009.

Peskin, V. *International Justice in Rwanda and the Balkans: Virtual Trials and the Struggle for State Cooperation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Rupnik, J. 'Les Balkans et la Pax Europea'. In *Les Banlieues de l'Europe. Les Politiques de Voisinage de l'Union Européenne*, ed. J. Rupnik, 127-149. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2007.

Sisson, J. 'A Holistic Approach to Dealing with the Past in the Balkans' *Politorbis* 3 (2010): 171–176.

Spoerri, M. 'Justice Imposed: How Policies of Conditionality Effect Transitional Justice in the Former Yugoslavia'. In *EU Conditionality in the Western Balkans*, ed. F. Bieber, 53–78. London/New York: Routledge, 2012.

Subotic, J. *Hijacked Justice: Dealing with the Past in the Balkans*. Ithaca, NY/London, UK: Cornell University Press, 2009.