

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# EDUCATION AND RECONCILIATION IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

Problems and Challenges

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In the long run, an education approach based more on how than about what to learn would help enable the students to critically approach their own in-group wrongdoings and historical delusions and build critical thinking about the past.



Educations based on facts rather than on »own versions of the past« and the politics of victimhood can lay the ground for reconciliation and overcoming even political and identity-based conflicts of the past.



Courageous public action against ethnic segregation in schools, nationalism, and politics of conflicting victimhood can result in profound changes.



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# SEARCHING FOR THE TOOLS TO LEARN TO LIVE TOGETHER

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In the Yugoslav successor states over the past two decades, narratives about the past still tend to be biased. Seeking to explain the present and pave the way for the future on the premises of a biased and exclusively interpreted past and of a culture of self-victimization dominates the region 25 years after the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and more than two decades after the war in Kosovo. Zygmunt Baumann described this growing tendency of constructing a better future by returning to an idealized – or as we might argue here politically constructed and ethnicized – version of the past as *retrotopia*. Closing nations and peoples into tribes and erect barriers and walls based on »exclusive« versions and narratives of the past reminds us very much of the situation in the former Yugoslav states and dominant political discourses. They portray the past conflicts through narrow perspectives that justify nationalist views and condemn, exclude, and devalue the 'enemy' other and their narrative (Pavlović et al., 2015). Autocratic and nationalistic tendencies have for a long time hindered the development of democratic institutions and mechanisms, in particular by leaving youth behind.

Ever since the end of the conflicts in the region, education, particularly history education, has been the main field of productions of exclusive and biased ethnic narratives of the past, of »our« version of history that is always confronting the version of the past by the »others«, our »genuine« enemies. In schools, revisionist histories do not foster the critical thinking skills that would prepare students to participate in political life, on the contrary. National policies of officially revising history have directly influenced the curricula and textbooks in schools in these countries, which doubtless leads to further fragmentation on ethnonational and/or political grounds. The 'two schools under one roof' policy in various multi-ethnic schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia lead to further ethnic polarization in society, supplying students with vastly different accounts of history based on their ethnicity. Following a similar pattern, religious education is preferred over civic education, which gives additional impetus to conservative, ethnic-based, and autocratic behavior that lacks the critical and engaged perspective necessary for democracy.

Textbooks are crucial resources for shaping collective memory and canonization of the national history and, therefore

extremely important for post-conflict societies. There are multiple examples of (ab)use of the educational material for preserving the enmity of the nations in the Balkans. Ilić shows that the dynamics of Serbian-Albanian relations in the Serbian textbooks over a whole twentieth century could serve as a good answer to the question »How to establish and how to systematically nurture a negative attitude towards neighbors« (Ilić 2014: 192). Even when textbooks offered more information, it was not for the purpose of better understanding the other but for validation and self-promotion of the ruling political system. Comparative research of history textbooks in the former Yugoslav states allows the conclusion of the basic idea that present and future generations are socialized in the context of the same arguments that led to the war. As Stojanović (2007) emphasize, the fact that the front lines in the war of remembrance were drawn exactly along the lines of the trenches excavated in the wars of the 1990s contributes to the preserving these lines and its exploiting by the political elites.

However, there were also multiple attempts to liberate the educational system of the conflict-oriented content that could lead to reconciliation of the people of the Balkans. Ever since 1998, CDRSEE (Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe) in Thessaloniki was running »The Southeast European Joint History Project« as a multinational and cross-disciplinary initiative with an aim to utilize multi-perspective, participative, and critical thinking approaches in history education to combat nationalism, overcome enmities and promote unity and diversity. Through workbooks spanning topics from the Ottoman Empire through to the end of World War II, by training teachers and offering ideas for discussion, activities, and ways to use those primary sources in the classroom, the project offered students a chance to explore history from many different points of view. Even though the project came unfortunately to an end, its multiperspective, plural, and critical approach stand out as a model for the future.

UNICEF and Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) have commissioned the *Mapping of Educational Initiatives for Intercultural Dialogue, Peacebuilding, and Reconciliation among Young People in the Western Balkans* (Clarke-Habibi 2019). The mapping identified over 190 educational initiatives across the six Western Balkans that could fall within the

themes of cooperation on intercultural dialogue, peace-building, and reconciliation in the region. The mapped initiatives included projects of various size and reach, from formal educational system initiatives to (vast majority of) non-formal educational activities implemented both within schools and outside of schools by international and local non-governmental organizations. The study confirmed the reasons to be concerned with nonformal initiatives that, albeit numerous, fail to provide tangible impacts on conflict drivers and structures beyond influencing the immediate participants »who afterward must continue to struggle within divisive social, economic and political structures« (ibid: 101). On the other side – and that is in the focus of this publication – some step forward has been notified in the formal education system in the region. However, in spite development of regionally appropriate pedagogical resources (usually by civil society organizations) that are ready for use and publicly available in regional languages, a key challenge remains to get teachers and students to use these materials. The study marks two important elements that remain our primary concern for future actions: 1) on the personal level, there is significant social and psychological resistance to adopting multiperspective and transformative peacebuilding pedagogies, while 2) on the policy level, the official adoption of more integrative, reconciliation-oriented materials and approaches are simply neglected (ibid: 102).

On the positive side, we can also place hopes in citizens and students organized bottom-up action against ethnic discrimination, nationalism, and segregation. The example of the fight against the 'two schools under one roof« policy in the Bosnian city of Jajce described in the contribution of Samir Beharić in this publication sends a message that engagement and fight to pay off and open up alternatives. It also shows that in order to make changes in education possible a fundamental question of the political realm and dominant political options has to be addressed. The nationalist narratives and competitive victimhoods that flood the political realm in the region are to be fought harshly, be it by courageous and visionary civic activisms, by academic struggles for objective history, or by common efforts of civil society and youth organizations in the whole region.

Having all these in mind, with this publication we aim to bring attention back to the topic of education and reconciliation. If we assume that problems and challenges in education in times of Covid-pandemics will rise, it is only consequential to dedicate closer attention to this fundamental question for the countries of former Yugoslavia. The first step is to look and even question the established norms and practices that strive for reconciliation in education, more than twenty years after the Yugoslav wars. Is there a new horizon that we should take into SEE classrooms that would stimulate solidarity across ethnic and national boundaries? Is there a way to teach children to live together, not apart, under the same roof? How can ethnic divisions be overcome, despite existing power structures that tend to instrumentalize ethnicity for political purposes? The following contributions provided some insights into the theme.

Dinka Čorkalo Biruški, Nora Ahmetaj, and Samir Beharić have contributed to this publication by contributions from three different but corresponding sectors, from the field of academia, civil society, and civic activism.

Dinka Čorkalo Biruški explores the questions of how schools may help in building critical thinking about the past. She explores the ties between objective and subjective history being embedded in the lives of communities with different and plural experiences and argues that teaching history as a process and teachers and schools as actors play a crucial role in reconciling these two dimensions of history. Schools are so important in this process, argues Čorkalo Biruški. On the one side, they provide the settings for »optimal contact« for students from different groups and experiences. On the other schools can become safe and open environments where children feel free to ask questions, to doubt what they hear, and to challenge what is presented to them as official truth. Schools and teachers ultimately can contribute to developing so much needed critical approach in education, which is more about *how* than about *what* to learn.

Nora Ahmetaj, in her contribution, presents a perspective on education and reconciliation from Kosovo. While from the Albanian point of view, reconciliation is conditional on an apology by Serbia, Kosovo Serbs see reconciliation as a process with apology being out of the question. It is against this background that Ahmetaj explores the relations between reconciliation and forgiveness and the particular role that education and the youth have to play under circumstances of huge interethnic distance like between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs. She underlines that the process of overcoming the distance and embarking on a substantial reconciliation can be best achieved through education based on facts.

Samir Beharić, a youth activist from Jajce, tells us a personal and powerful story of fighting the segregation and overcoming ethnic prejudices in education in his home town. He provides us with a historical account of the emergence of the »two schools under one roof« policy, which he directly describes as an apartheid project in the middle of Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet, Samir Beharić does not leave us disillusioned, on the contrary: He describes his and his co-students' fight and resistance against this policy in Jajce, demasks »national interests« as serving economic and electoral benefits, and concludes that nationalism and segregation are not the way forward. Samir's final words stating that »clear visions, strong will, and resolute perseverance are what it takes to bring down every bad political decision,« stand out as a reminder and a signpost for future engagement against nationalism and segregation in all parts of societies in Southeastern Europe.

# WHEN THE PAST IS NOT HISTORY YET: HOW SCHOOLS MAY HELP IN BUILDING CRITICAL THINKING ABOUT THE PAST

DINKA ČORKALO BIRUŠKI

In post-conflict and transitional settings, and the countries established after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia still struggle in different ways with conflicts of the 1990s, confronting the history and conflictual past is one of the most demanding tasks. This undertaking is relevant not only for politics and politicians but first and foremost for the ordinary citizens. Moreover, this task is of utmost importance for the social reconstruction process, for the processes of building society, public institutions, and general democratization of the society (Čorkalo Biruški, 2012). In this process education, especially public education, i. e., public schooling, is a key building block, especially in social contexts where former conflicting groups continue to live together within the same communities.

The countries in the region are paradigmatic examples of such communities. Confronting the past in such social contexts is especially complex and challenging: everybody feels victimized, the boundaries of who was a perpetrator and who was the victim may not be so straightforward, there are irreconcilable narratives of who did what to whom, when, and why. From the social psychology perspective, we know that this tendency to compete over the victim status, i. e., *competitive victimhood*, is one of the major obstacles for the processes of social reconstruction and reconciliation. However, we also know that victims and perpetrators have different psychological needs, as proposed by the needs-based model of reconciliation (Shnabel and Nadler, 2008), and satisfying those needs increases the willingness of conflicting parties to reconcile with each other.

The model argues that in times of conflict, beyond material destruction and competition over »scarce resources«, different dimensions of the identity of victims and perpetrators are severely threatened. For the victims, when they suffered (massive) violence, their sense of control and power is under threat. Unlike victims, the perpetrators have to deal with impairment of their moral image and fear of being socially excluded from the community because they violated moral standards and social norms. These identity threats elicit different needs and accompanied emotions that impede the process of healing and reconciliation if not satisfied and fulfilled. Therefore, the victims need to be empowered, their suffering acknowledged, and their sense of control and agency regained. Contrarily, the need for perpetrators is to restore their moral image and to be accepted by others in the common

moral community (Nadler and Shnabel, 2015). These processes are extremely complex, difficult, and demanding, and more so in communities where former adversaries continue to live together in the same communities (Čorkalo Biruški and Ajduković, 2016). The complexity of the process is complicated even further by knowing that group blaming does not end with those who committed violence personally, nor the group suffering stops with those who experience it directly. By merely sharing the ethnic group's membership with those who committed violence or with those who suffered from it, the members of respective groups also share the feelings of guilt and shame or the feelings of pain and grief. Hence, the group membership and identification with our in-group predispose us to feel what our co-members feel, even though we have not participated in committing crimes personally and even though we have not experienced the injuries directly (see Branscombe & Doosje, 2004). Moreover, the shared group membership and the legacy of conflict make it possible to participate in »taking-sides« and contribute to the construction of a (very often) biased narrative about the conflict even a long time after the conflict ended.

The recent wars in most Yugoslav successor states are not exceptions in this regard, and research has already documented intergenerational transmission of collective victimhood (e. g. Taylor et al., 2020). In dealing with the complexities of post-conflict contexts, the first step in helping to satisfy the different needs of those who participated and those who survived is to understand what happened during the conflict. This truth-seeking process we may call *objective history*. Historical accounts, fact-checking, war crime tribunals, oral history, documenting the stories of suffering and victimization – all these procedures are important in answering the question of what happened, in establishing truth and acknowledging human suffering. However, above and beyond the facts, there is *subjective history*, there are family histories, untold stories, perceptions, and interpretations that are difficult to ignore, and it does not make sense to do so. In the everyday living of the post-conflict communities, it means there are two parallel processes taking place: one is the process of teaching and hearing official narrative in public schools that is presented as objective history (i. e. master narrative, Carretero, 2017).

The other is the process of how these official narratives are received, understood, and modified through the lenses of

different community groups who may have experienced different family histories. In the complexity of social circumstances of many post-conflict communities who survived massive violence, disintegration, and the breakdown of their community ties, a fact that people were on the opposite sides of the conflict – not necessarily as former combatants, but as family members, supporters or simply passive bystanders – is hard to be neglected. In this regard, these societies are communities of *living histories*, and this aspect cannot be ignored in the process of facing and confronting the past. In this process, the role of teaching history is crucial, and teachers and schools, in general, are the most important social actors in making this role functional and in service of promoting peace.

The importance of school in this process is twofold. First, schools provide the settings for »optimal contact« for students coming from different groups and with different experiences. By having them together, they can learn about managing their differences, practice their interdependence, and eventually develop friendships, as shown by a plethora of research in a variety of settings (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2011). Second, by building capacity to be a safe and open environment, schools may become places where children feel free to ask questions, to doubt what they hear, to check their family histories, and to challenge what they hear as official truth. It means that history teaching should be critical, by taking into account multiple perspectives, and by offering a variety of experiences, including experiences of past victimization of »others« so the picture the children draw is not made of black and white, but of different shades of whatever color we may offer them in our public education. This approach is very demanding since teachers meet students with different family histories, and their views on recent events may be colored by the experiences of their family members more than by solid facts. Nevertheless, the role of teachers in school is not to change the destiny of people who found themselves at different sides of the conflict but to consider their students motives and identity needs in order to make sure they are able to take into account different perspectives as well. At the same time, it means that teachers should provide a safe place for students to share their perspectives, especially when this perspective is not a dominant one. By engaging with students in constructive discussions and encouraging them to ask questions, to challenge hegemonic views, to distinguish between (ethnic) myths and objective historical facts, teachers may serve as role models for crossing intergroup boundaries and for building more cooperative intergroup relations.

However, one may wonder if it is possible for teachers, particularly history teachers, to take this important social role that goes beyond what we usually expect from our schoolteachers? My answer is conditionally affirmative. Namely, such expectations are reasonable if there is a firm and determined political will to support (public) schools that are more inclusive, more open and more prepared to teach and practice the active citizenship of their students. In order to do so, the schoolteachers need far more preparation and training to make their classrooms more open to discussion and criti-

cal thinking. They also need more training in dealing with difficult and sensitive issues that may be important for the identity of their students but also for their own identity. They also need peer support and appropriate supervision in order to make the process of teaching history constructive, creative, and thoughtfully oriented to building bridges and paving the road to more peaceful communities.

This critical approach does not assume that »anything goes« and everything is relative. It means that in order to have a full understanding of history as a chain of causes and consequences, it is our responsibility to provide children and youth with all the facts and perspectives so they may think about them for themselves, critically examine them, understand historical delusions and mistakes and adopt a clear take-home message about necessity to be active citizens in order to be able to live in peace among themselves and with others and to prevent future conflicts. This critical approach is more about *how* than about *what* to learn (Carretero, 2017); nevertheless, if being equipped with »know-how« the students will be able to approach critically a variety of contents including those that require taking a critical stance towards their own in-group wrongdoings and historical delusions.

# EDUCATION AND RECONCILIATION GO HAND IN HAND

NORA AHMETAJ

Since 2015 several think tanks both in Kosovo and the Western Balkans conducted research on the topic of reconciliation in the region in order to test the pulse of the public about the topic, conceptualize it within the Kosovar cultural context and beyond, and provide recommendation on how to reach the end goal, the reconciliation.

The concept of reconciliation seems to have a strong individual and ethnic connotations, exacerbating tensions across different generations of Kosovo Albanians and Serbs. Reconciliation is, hence, perceived as something more feasible at the individual level than at the collective level for all ethnic groups. One argument could be due to a lack of confidence of Kosovan citizens of all ethnicities in national and international institutions, and the implementation gap of policies regarding political and socio-economic improvements as the main challenges for the reconciliation process<sup>1</sup>.

Given the outcome of the recent war from 1998 to 1999, one could freely say that the process of reconciliation from the Albanian point of view is conditional on an apology given from Serbian officials in Belgrade for the crimes committed during the 98–99 war in Kosovo. Kosovo Serbs, meanwhile, see the issue of reconciliation as a process, while Apology is out of the question. They also consider that, especially in the post-war period, they were victims themselves, Apology according to them on behalf of someone is rejected on the ground that it should be done by those individuals who have committed crimes, and not to stigmatize the whole community because of some who have abused power.

Reconciliation involves a lot of talking about the transgression and talking about forgiveness, yet, it is a separate is-

sue than the experience of forgiveness. Although they are related to each other, and there is a psychological relationship, *they are still different issues*, suggests Minow (1999). *Forgiveness is about Power*. In other words, the relations between reconciliation and forgiveness are interconnected. If one always delayed reconciliation until forgiveness had taken place, then some vitally important kinds of reconciliation might not be possible. Subsequently, the realization that forgiveness is often a helpful step toward reconciliation should not lead us into the mistaken belief that forgiveness is a necessary condition for reconciliation.

It is not easy to find an exact definition of what reconciliation means since this process is different depending on the country and its situation. Nevertheless, the sociologist John Paul Lederach (1998) defines reconciliation in terms of praxis rather than theory, and he places human relationships at the core of the reconciliation process.

Whether in people's personal life or when they hear it being used in media, by the institutions and different organizations, reconciliation is part of the discourse in Kosovo. The word seems to reflect dialogue, renewal of broken relations, apologizing, forgiveness, or sacrifice for a better future. It is important to make a distinction between forgiveness as an intrapersonal event versus reconciliation, which Worthington defined as restoration of trust after a breach of trust. Should reconciliation evolve as an organic process, the chances for success would be merely higher. The bottom-up approach emerging as a need of the citizens to find the truth, respect each other, and communicate, rather than an imposed top-down approach would have had bigger chances of success.

A much-anticipated sustainable peace and reconciliation process in the long run can be best achieved through education. If new generations have another perspective of the past based on true facts, it is possible that the process of reconciliation speeds up.

Among many combinations of concepts in the process of reconciliation, the one that is most problematic is the relationship between truth and reconciliation, an extremely complicated one. Truth leads to reconciliation since »truth disinfects the wounds, has a cathartic effect, and helps people to heal« (Daly and Sarkin, 2007).

<sup>1</sup> For more see:  
 – Murphy and Hampton, 1988.  
 – Cunningham, 1999.  
 – <https://policyblog.uni-graz.at/2019/08/kosovo-these-days-empowering-youth-in-the-reconciliation-process/>  
 – <https://prishtinainsight.com/new-research-reveals-challenges-reconciliation-kosovo/>  
 – <https://www.paxforpeace.nl/publications/all-publications/public-perception-survey-and-public-dialogue-about-future-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-trc-of-kosovo>  
 – [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322036620\\_Process\\_of\\_Reconciliation\\_in\\_the\\_Western\\_Balkans\\_and\\_Turkey\\_A\\_Qualitative\\_Study](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322036620_Process_of_Reconciliation_in_the_Western_Balkans_and_Turkey_A_Qualitative_Study)

There is a great deal of distrust among Kosovar youth of what is studied in contemporary history books, and this suggests that current data in history textbooks should be examined. The role of different actors in the field of memory work will help historical dialogue and the reconciliation process. The experiences of society after the war from 1998 to 1999 shaped a social trust in Kosovo, and the impact of individual war-related experiences and exposure to war proved to be more decisive for individual experiences than for incidental war experiences.

Young people who did not experience the war themselves are left uninformed about the very reasons why reconciliation is needed. What is more concerning in Kosovo is that children from both groups do not go to school together and are taught different curricula with fairly contradicting interpretations of the recent war, leaving youths with a one-dimensional story of the past. Both groups of young people, especially Albanians, tend to believe their parents' narratives about the events of the war in Kosovo, and much less history textbooks, media, or other information sources. Balkan schoolbooks have contrasting versions of the history of Kosovo; subsequently, this will contribute to troubling repercussions for future relations between neighboring countries.

Generally, there is a belief that reconciliation at the individual level is more honest than that in a community level. Here again, one underlines the role of the state, lack of trust in its institutions, and the skepticism that citizens in general and youth, in particular, have towards the politicians in Kosovo and Serbia who lacks the political will to genuinely work towards reconciliation. The link between reconciliation and the ethnic dimension in the literature but also in the societal discourse is inevitable. The ethnic character of reconciliation is particularly important because it contains in itself the general component of conflicts in the Balkans. In order to achieve permanent peace and long-term stability in the region and to explain why this is not only in their own interests but also in the public interest, there is a need to engage as many young people as possible in the process of reconciliation and fact-based disclosure.

It is true that sincere regret on the part of the wrongdoer opens the door to forgiveness and, often to reconciliation. This is not to suggest, however, that we should always demand regret as a condition for forgiveness and reconciliation. When a person under his authority or representing the state comes to regrets as a result of his own spiritual growth, we are witness to an inspiring transformation of character. Any repugnance that is simply a response to a demand for external pressure, however, is very likely to be fake and not honest.

Kosovo cannot ask nor convince Serbia to give an apology for the past wrongdoings. As a result of pressure, whether gentle or more coercive, being imposed by certain groups or foreign actors states mostly willingly enter into negotiations for redress. Kosovo has a young population, more

than 50 % of it is under 35 years old, and this makes its authorities and society be very careful in policymaking, and how to educate generations but also how to use the energy and strength of these young people. Both countries have long stagnated with the past, always trumpeting themselves as victims of the past and not convincingly working on genuine documentation of the past and how to deal with it. Perhaps the issue of youth education should be essential to both the governments of Kosovo and Serbia. The fact-finding education can also play a strong role in identity formation among Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo and beyond.

# THE POWER OF YOUTH ACTIVISM: JAJCE STUDENTS AGAINST THE »TWO SCHOOLS UNDER ONE ROOF«

SAMIR BEHARIĆ

In 1997, after my family returned to a war-torn city of Jajce, where I was born, I enrolled in primary school as the only Bosniak kid in the class. Since the school was operating according to a Croatian curriculum, the Catholic religion was a mandatory class for all pupils – except for me. My first-grade teacher Ratko Glavaš told me I could go out in the schoolyard and play – or stay inside the classroom but keep it silent. Being a curious six-year-old, I decided to stay in the classroom and listen to »forbidden lectures« by sister Marica, a Bosnian Franciscan nun who fascinated me with her storytelling skills. Even though I could not participate in the class, I enjoyed listening to those captivating Biblical stories that I remember even today. I must admit I had a hard time not being allowed to engage in the discussions, but somehow, I felt my moment would come.

One day, when sister Marica asked her class if they know where Jesus was born, no one responded. She repeated her question, this time angrily: »Where was Jesus born?« Crickets again, no one had the answer. The third time sister Marica asked her question, she was almost shouting, so I quickly raised my hand from the back of the classroom. She turned to me, saying politely: »Oh, Samir, do you want to go out to the toilet?« I said: »No, I want to reply to your question. I know where Jesus was born.« Confused, she looked at me, then at her class, and then turned to me, saying: »Well, fine, if you know where Jesus was born, then why don't you tell us.« Finally, I had the chance to participate in the class big time, so I proudly responded: »Jesus was born in Bethlehem, of course.« I still remember the look on her face: she was ashamed that none of »her students« knew the answer, but at the same time proud that someone who did not even attend the class received the knowledge she shared with great passion. Sister Marica spent the rest of her class shaming my peers in the classroom for not knowing something that »even a Muslim student knows«. Although my friends from the classroom were a bit jealous of me for stealing the show, I was proud of myself – as much as my teacher Ratko, who later that day called my parents to tell them about my class participation.

Within the following five years, more Bosniak families returned to Jajce, sending their children to attend primary school in buildings with no Croat students. Local nationalist politicians did not even bother to bring Bosniak and Croat pupils into the same classrooms. That's when some of

the first »two schools under one roof« emerged in Jajce. Even though vilified today, this project, supported by the international community, had a noble intention. The aim was to bring children of different ethnicities, who had previously attended school separately, into a single building. That is when I got transferred into another classroom, dominated by Bosniak students. Even though my Croat peers were attending classes in the same school building, the relationship between the two groups was everything but friendly. School fights, bullying, and ethnic disputes among pupils have been part of the every-day routine for all of those attending segregated schools in Jajce.

## SDA AND HDZ UNITED IN DIVISIONS

The »two schools under the same roof« framework, made to put borders into students' minds, undoubtedly had a strong influence on my young adulthood. This apartheid project, one of a kind in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe, has been polarizing young people and placing hate and nationalism at the top of the school curriculum for the past two decades already. Even though it was envisaged as a temporary solution and considered only a first step toward full integration of schools, nationalist political elites kept it as a blueprint for segregating even more schools.

I began questioning segregation in education when I started high school and met some of my first-grade Croat peers again. Unlike the primary schools, the high schools in Jajce have been operating as integrated units with Bosniak and Croat students attending the classes together. Even though there were no walls dividing us inside the school now, eight years of segregated education has built high walls inside of students' heads.

Unlike the school fight wounds that have healed up a long time ago, the consequences of ethnic segregation in education are visible still today. Instead of integrating those ethnically segregated schools, the politicians from the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) and the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH), have even tried to deepen the segregation rifts in Jajce. In the summer of 2016, a group of local politicians came to the idea of dividing two ethnically mixed high schools in Jajce. Both Bosniak and Croat nationalist politicians were strongly sup-

porting this idea. According to the parties, this was to accommodate the demand of many parents who were unhappy with the Croat curriculum and who wanted their children to learn about Bosnian culture, history, and geography.

Courageous high school students from Jajce refused to buy that idea, so they went to the streets, quickly attracting the attention of civil rights groups. Shortly after, the international organizations and foreign embassies openly supported students' struggle, putting pressure on politicians to give up on their segregation plans. By the end of July 2017, student efforts resulted in a youth-led resistance that prevented local politicians from dividing best friends and potentially making them into enemies. For the first time in post-war Bosnian history, Bosniak and Croat nationalist parties have given up their plan to segregate a school. The news about this undertaking reached every corner of the globe with international media reporting about the success of »victorious Bosnia students« who kept both high schools integrated.

In November 2018, the OSCE and the Dutch Government honored the high school students from Jajce with the Max van der Stoep Award in recognition of their outstanding courage and inspirational activism, which led to the prevention of further segregation in schools in Jajce as well as throughout the country. I had the honor to receive the award together with four students and two teachers, who were among the rare high school employees openly supporting their students.

## YOUTH ACTIVISTS SHOULD »GET THEIR HANDS DIRTY«

Today, students in Jajce attend the first nine years of elementary education ethnically segregates. Until the age of 15, pupils attend classes only with their peers of the same ethnic group. Thanks to Jajce students' uprising, the high schools have remained integrated, and all students attend classes together. The exception are courses from the so-called »ethnic group of subjects«: Bosnian/Croat language, Islamic/Catholic religion, history, and geography. During those classes, high school students go to separate classrooms, depending on which ethnic group they belong to. Exactly those classes were a formal reason for nationalist politicians to invoke »national interests« and demand another segregated school.

Behind the curtain of »national interests« is money. The new school was intended mainly for economic reasons and to gain political success right before the 2016 local elections. The new school would mean new job openings and a new way for the SDA to employ its party members. They were supported by the HDZ because new divisions benefited both the SDA and HDZ. And so, under the guise of improving the quality of education and respecting cultural values, ethnic segregation in education mainly serves economic and electoral benefits.

If I were a local politician in Jajce, instead of making plans to segregate a school, I would be more concerned if the existing schools will have any students left. Young people, who are sick and tired of nationalist politicians' empty promises, are leaving Jajce massively. New generations of young people are growing impatient with the old war generals still running the nationalist parties and chasing young people away from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnian politicians should know that – unlike them – the world has changed. Today, young people speak foreign languages, study abroad, and cooperate with their peers from the Western Balkans and the EU. The real task for politicians from Jajce and other Bosnian cities is to find a way how to keep young people at bay. Nationalism and segregation are not the way forward.

Currently, there are 56 segregated schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The goal of Jajce students was not only to prevent segregation of high schools in Jajce, but also to inspire young people across Bosnia and Herzegovina to stand up against for-far-too-long segregated schools. Not only is this possible, but far more achievable than some might think. Clear vision, strong will, and resolute perseverance are what it takes to bring down every bad political decision. Probably the most valuable lesson of this struggle is the fact that young people if organised properly, have the power to cause tectonic shifts in Bosnian politics. The next step for Jajce activists is to »get their hands dirty« and enter politics. A systemic overhaul of the Bosnian education system is what the future generations of young Bosnians urgently need. They will have my vote!

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# EDUCATION AND RECONCILIATION IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

## Problems and Challenges



Teachers and schools are the most important social actors in helping communities to deal with their »living histories« in the process of facing and confronting the past. In the long run, an education approach based more on how than about what to learn would help enable the students to critically approach their own in-group wrongdoings and historical delusions and build critical thinking about the past.



A sustainable peace and reconciliation process, in the long run, can be best achieved through the education of the youth. Educations based on facts rather than on »own versions of the past« and the politics of victimhood can lay the ground for reconciliation and overcoming even political and identity-based conflicts of the past.



Vision, strong will, and resolute perseverance are what it takes to bring down every bad political decision both on the general level of society and in the educational sector. Courageous public action against ethnic segregation in schools, nationalism, and politics of conflicting victimhood can result in profound changes.

Further information on the topic can be found here:  
**[www.fes-southeasteurope.org](http://www.fes-southeasteurope.org)**