



European  
Movement  
Serbia



# District of Reconciliation: Reconciliation Reflections Newsletter Year 1

Reconciliation is a marathon,  
not a sprint.

**“These essays have been produced as part of the project ‘District of Reconciliation’, co-funded by the European Union, implemented with the participation of the European Movement in Serbia and coordinated by the Foundation Novi Sad European Capital of Culture. Their contents are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union or the project partners.”**

# CONTENTS

• INTRODUCTION .....	4
• The Tuzla panel of the district of reconciliation project .....	6
• The First Panel .....	10
• The Second Panel .....	14
• Serbia Needs a New Regional Policy – Former Ambassador Prof. Dr. Duško Lopandić ...	18
• Culture of Peace in (Post-)Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina – Prof. Dr. Nerzuk Ćurak ....	20
• Preparatory obstacles on the road to good-neighbourly relations between BiH, Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia – Prof. Dr. Jaroslav Pecnik .....	24
• Bosnia and Herzegovina, 30 years since the signing of the Dayton Agreement – Prof. Dr. Jaroslav Pecnik .....	27
• Lasting peace in the Balkans – Former Ambassador Dr. Branka Latinović .....	32
• Politics and the process of reconciliation in the Balkans – Former Ambassador Dragana Filipović .....	37
• Serbia – EU: Cornerstones of Cooperation – Gordana Lazarević .....	42
• A flower in the ashes – Dr. Jelica Minić .....	49
• Between the Rattling of Weapons and the Voice of Conscience – Ms. Tea Gorjanc Prelević .....	53

## INTRODUCTION

This yearly newsletter consists of a report of the first panel of the project in Tuzla, and the related essays by the panel members. It has been expanded by additional essays related to the theme, which were provided by members of the Forum for International relations. The Theme of the panel also informs the future large collection of texts and reports which are meant to follow and finish the project. This collection is the written trace of a project that refuses to treat reconciliation as a slogan, a ceremonial gesture, or an administrative milestone that can be checked off and archived. The work that unfolds across these pages begins from a condition that readers across the Western Balkans recognise even when it is not named directly, namely that the region has learned to coexist with unresolved pasts without truly confronting them, and has learned to speak of peace while continuing to live with habits of separation.

Public language has absorbed reconciliation as a familiar term, repeated in strategies, speeches, and donor frameworks, while everyday life often continues along inherited lines of distance, selective memory, displaced responsibility, and a silence that is easier to preserve than the discomfort of sustained encounter. In such an environment, reconciliation cannot be reduced to institutional wording or to the absence of open conflict, because stability can exist without meeting, and coexistence can be performed as politeness while mistrust remains intact beneath it. This collection is therefore offered to readers not as a decorative appendix to a set of events, but as a public record of an attempt to return reconciliation to lived space, to keep questions open where false closure has become a habit, and to preserve the lines of discussion that would otherwise disappear once the audience disperses.

Within the pages of this collection, readers will find texts that hold together several registers of engagement without collapsing them into a single voice, extending the debates into reflection on political realities. It is a lamentable admission that regional peace and reconciliation in the Western Balkans had existed for long enough in the form of negative peace that had been repeatedly mistaken for peace itself. Open warfare had ended and the basic expectation of restraint had generally held, yet the absence of mass violence had not produced a durable transformation in how political communities understood themselves, their neighbours, or the legitimacy of coexistence. This context had been moulded and formed by the continuous translation of unresolved conflict into the post-conflict period through identity disputes that were reproduced, escalated, and internationalised. Political conflict had been framed as a contest over legitimacy, dignity, and historical truth, with communities maintaining mutually incompatible narratives in which innocence was produced at home and guilt was exported across borders, while memory had functioned less as mourning than as mobilisation. The broader difficulty had not lain in the absence of cooperative frameworks or formal commitments to dialogue, but in the weakness of internalised norms capable of disciplining conflict-oriented discourse. Political language had not been an ornament but a mechanism that constituted identities and normalised threat perceptions, and where political life had remained marked by habitual crisis-production

and the routine securitisation of difference, reconciliation had been undermined at its roots. Identity had been treated as a security category and the neighbour positioned as a potential danger through narratives that rendered coexistence contingent on the other side's acceptance of one's own moral and historical claims, ensuring that each defensive move was interpreted by others as aggression and reinforcing an intersubjective cycle in which mistrust reproduced itself.

Even so, the context had not been reducible to unchanging fatalism. The region had shown that discursive movement could occur and could matter, because when political leadership had turned away from incendiary language, treated identity questions as non-existential, and presented itself as representative of all citizens, social tension had lowered and bilateral relations had sometimes improved even while disagreements remained. Where that restraint had been absent, disputes had been readily internationalised and major-power alignments recruited into local identity defence, reinforcing the pattern in which foreign policy became a stage for performing identity rather than a domain of pragmatic trade-offs. The practical context of reconciliation had therefore been defined by a persistent gap between formal commitments to peace and the everyday reproduction of conflict-oriented discourse, in which peace existed as a pause that could be extended, but reconciliation depended on changing the permissible language of politics and weakening the legitimacy of conflict-oriented narratives.

The first newsletter, or reflections, starts from a three-part overview of the first reconciliation panel in Tuzla, which records the opening premises of the District of Reconciliation project and then follows the discussion as it moves, and was prepared by the first panel moderator. It examines Dayton as a peace settlement and as a lived political condition, through the context of a region trapped by the problem of cooperation that is repeatedly affirmed yet repeatedly trapped by unresolved disputes and externalised "stability," and references the question of what can still be done when public language, institutions, and memory politics keep reproducing the same crises even after three decades of formal peace. After that, the newsletter turns to authored columns by panel participants and guests, that take the Tuzla discussion into more focused lines of argument and, in doing so, keep the same tension in view, between reconciliation as lived practice and reconciliation as administrative language.

## The Tuzla panel of the district of reconciliation project

### Introduction

Stanka Parać Damjanović of LDA Subotica opened the first regional panel within the District of Reconciliation project by welcoming participants on behalf of the organisers and by setting an intentionally conversational tone for the day. She described the gathering as the practical beginning of a three-year process expected to run through the end of 2027, framed as a cycle of meetings and public-facing activities rather than a single event. The project was positioned as part of a longer continuum of civil society work in the region, rooted in a commitment to a culture of dialogue, the rebuilding of trust, regional cooperation, and reconciliation as an organised civic endeavour. She linked this work to earlier regional efforts, naming the Igman Initiative as a landmark precedent and noting that one of its key actors was present among the partners. By invoking that continuity, she anchored the event in an established civil-society tradition while also signalling that the “District of Reconciliation” format was designed for a changed environment. She contrasted the earlier period, when political decision-makers had, in her account, shown more explicit will to engage alongside the civil sector, with the present moment, which she characterised as different in its conditions and therefore requiring a recalibrated approach. The continuation she described was not a replication of earlier models, but an attempt to carry forward the core logic of civic reconciliation work while shifting attention toward local initiatives, stronger networks, and the linking of communities marked by wartime events and their aftermath.

Within that logic, she placed emphasis on the local scale as the main site where reconciliation-related work could be sustained, starting from the assumption that communities exposed to the violence and social ruptures of the 1990s remained affected by new tensions and disruptive developments in their countries and the wider environment. Her point was that the present was not a neutral “post-conflict” landscape, but an evolving context still generating pressures and competing narratives. She presented the panel as an opening moment in a dialogue circle intended to unfold over the three-year duration, and connected this framework to intergenerational solidarity and intergenerational dialogue as integral to how trust-building and regional cooperation were to be discussed. These themes were linked to European integration as a broader horizon in which democratic standards, regional stability, and civic participation intersected. She indicated that the organisers had sought to create space both for those who had witnessed the events of the recent past and for those born later and shaped by inherited stories, public narratives, and

contemporary perceptions rather than direct wartime experience, treating those positions as different but mutually necessary.

A central element of her introduction was the decision to integrate culture into the project as method rather than accessory. She said the organisers had built into the project a cultural dimension and suggested that this had been a key reason the European Union had recognised the project's quality and different approach. Culture was presented as cultural creation and artistic expression capable of mobilising communities and articulating memory in plural settings. She described the "districts of reconciliation" as initiatives intended to activate communities, particularly in multicultural and multiethnic environments in which different memories coexisted and in which remembrance could harden into competing certainties, with an explicit focus on young people and on varied artistic expressions unfolding across the districts.

She then outlined the project's trajectory by describing a next phase expected to begin the following year and by stating that the programme would return to Tuzla as a site of "natural alliance" within the reconciliation process. She invited participants to follow the project's activities and to stay engaged, stressing that the panel was not intended to end that day but to continue across the full three years. She described opportunities for participants to express their views through an electronic channel titled "Reflections on Reconciliation," identified Uroš as the editor, and framed it as a space for positions and contributions beyond the limits of a single event. She also invited cooperation on an analytical track and on a publication planned as a collected volume over the same period, presenting participation as a continuing practice spanning spoken discussion, written reflection, and longer-form work.

In her remarks on organisers and partners, she underscored the civil society identity of the initiative and situated it in relationships built over decades. She named LDA Subotica and the Forum of Citizens of Tuzla and described their cooperation as spanning close to thirty years, dating back to the mid-1990s, sustained by a view that their societies deserved to be better, based on the rule of law and democracy. She highlighted that the project was led by the Foundation "Novi Sad European Capital of Culture," noted the inclusion of OPENS as a youth network linked to Novi Sad as European Youth Capital, and framed the project as a channel through which the legacy and values of these initiatives could be affirmed and carried forward. She mentioned Nikšić in Montenegro with congratulations and expressed hope that the District of Reconciliation would create opportunities for cooperation with Nikšić as well. She urged participants to join the discussion, identified Uroš Popadić of the European Movement in Serbia as the first moderator and as editor of the project's policy research and publication work, noted that the European Movement in Serbia was a key partner, wished participants a productive interaction toward late 2027, and yielded the floor.

Vehid Šehić of the Forum of Citizens of Tuzla followed by thanking those present and describing Tuzla as the only city in the former Yugoslavia during the war where anti-war activists were able to gather. He recalled conferences held there in October and

a large gathering at the end of November 1995, describing Tuzla as the place where an initial civil-society initiative of anti-war activists and organisations from the former Yugoslavia had taken shape and later developed into the Igman Initiative in 2000. In his account, the Igman Initiative had contributed significantly to building understanding and trust among citizens and remained a relevant lineage for the current project.

He articulated a principle he associated with that earlier work, insisting on affirming truth based on facts rather than subjective impressions. He contrasted this with what he described as the lived reality in Bosnia and Herzegovina of “three truths,” characterised as three half-truths with consequences more destructive than an overt lie. He tied the narrative to long-term civic networks by stating that he had met Stanka in 1996 during a visit by a Tuzla delegation with guests from Sarajevo, and he mentioned Boško Kovačević as someone important for affirming a model of society grounded in respect for collective and individual rights as conditions for individual freedom.

He then recalled a triangle of multicultural cooperation signed in Tuzla in 2001 between Novi Sad, Osijek, and Tuzla, linking Professor Jaroslav Pecnik’s presence to that history. He described early cooperation between universities, clinical centres, and cultural institutions and then said that political change had disrupted cooperation at the level of authorities after 2003, while civil society cooperation continued. He contrasted this with another triangle linking Croatia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and said that in 2007 an agreement had been signed by three foreign ministers in Neum. He connected this to later EU funding, stating that after Croatia entered the EU a major project of 64 million euros had been granted for projects involving the three states, with continuing benefits for NGOs and local communities. He presented this as evidence that regional cooperation mattered, especially for civil society organisations, which he described as the most moral part of society because they had spoken truth in the hardest times and insisted on recognising all people as people.

He developed this point through the metaphor of “neighbourhood,” arguing that the concept condensed the substance of human and civil rights and describing the neighbour as the first who could help in difficulty. He said Tuzla had deserved to host this work because it had shown consistency and principled conduct, and expressed a wish for such an approach to be expanded across the former Yugoslavia. He spoke of obligations toward Bosnia and Herzegovina on the part of Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro, and described a present in which Bosnia and Herzegovina had been treated as a kind of free zone where actors could act without respecting the sovereignty of the state, meaning its institutions, which he said were frequently bypassed, including by Zagreb and Belgrade.

His remarks broadened into a critique of contemporary politics and values, arguing that changes in government produced discontinuity because authorities pursued narrow interests and politics lost its civic meaning. He described the acceptance of a

neoliberal concept elevating material interest, spoke of the return of “ghosts of the past,” and characterised the present not as revisionism but falsification of history. Against that background, he argued for confrontation with the past based on facts and for building understanding across categories of experience, singling out former detainees and families who had lost loved ones as needing dialogue because they could best understand one another’s suffering. He asked how trust could be restored in captured institutions and how faith in justice could be re-established, described sincerity, courage, solidarity, and empathy as devalued, and returned to culture as a way to rebuild the inner side of individuals and communities by encouraging people to see one another first as human beings while respecting collective, civil, and individual rights. He ended by stressing the priority of young people, while arguing for an intergenerational combination of experience and energy, and closed by framing an obligation toward their children to create a society of mutual respect and recognition.

## The First Panel

The Moderator, Uroš Popadić, opened the first panel by thanking the preceding speakers and the audience on behalf of the European Movement in Serbia and the project partners, noting that the discussion would begin immediately because the panel included strong speakers and time was limited. Without reintroducing the panelists, he moved directly into the first question and, following the agenda, invited Professor Nerzeg Ćurak from Sarajevo to start, signalling in a light register that he was “throwing him into the fire” and apologising in advance for the heaviness of the questions. His opening prompt asked for an assessment of the reach of the Dayton Agreement in building a culture of peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina over the past three decades, framing the panel’s first exchange around the relationship between a peace settlement, the passage of time, and the social conditions of peace.

Professor Ćurak thanked the Forum of Citizens of Tuzla and Vehid Šehić for the invitation and framed his response through the anniversary atmosphere, arguing that proliferating conferences and “celebratory” readings of Dayton were not producing new thinking. He said Dayton had produced political stasis and circular time that suited political actors by concentrating decision-making and insulating it from meaningful scrutiny or deeper Europeanisation. Beyond institutional design and ethnic divisions, he stressed a decisive separation between the political class and ordinary citizens, describing a split between citizens’ lived “Dayton daily life” and a political everyday sustained by self-justifying language, reproduced privilege, and the deliberate freezing of time. He distinguished military, political, diplomatic, and civil peace, crediting the military dimension with sustaining the absence of armed conflict, while arguing that diplomatic practice prioritised “stability” over development and that security-first agendas crowded out progress. Against that, he treated civil peace as the only domain of genuine advancement, contrasting everyday traces of a Bosnia absent from political discourse with a political sphere governed by a “negotiated doctrine of enmity” that reproduced stasis. He endorsed the “District of Reconciliation” concept on the premise that reconciliation had to belong to everyone and concluded that civil peace had to become the central public question, meaning power had to be taken from the political class.

Uroš Popadić reacted by noting that the answer resonated with his own interests in peace studies at the doctoral level and said he welcomed every word of the intervention, then pivoted toward what he called a more formal diplomatic view by turning to Professor Duško Lopandić. His question asked how the situation created by Dayton had affected regional cooperation and EU integration, and whether it had helped or hindered those processes, positioning the next exchange at the intersection of peace settlement, regional initiatives, and European frameworks. Lopandić thanked the organisers and opened with a personal note tied to Tuzla, greeting local figures and noting the presence of younger people and generational continuity. He described

reconciliation talk as a “Groundhog Day” effect, but insisted that one should never give up, framing this as fidelity to the values that held communities together. He argued that the geopolitical setting and the EU itself had shifted into a Europe “in war,” and returned to the postwar sequence of EU-driven regional formats, from Royaumont and Serbia’s exclusion under sanctions, through the Stability Pact, and then Erhard Busek’s effort to convert externally led structures into a regional body, linked to the Regional Cooperation Council in 2008. He described enlargement as stuck in repetition and further worsened by the EU’s multi-crisis decade, and noted that the eventual settlement of the current war would shape a generation as Dayton had. He nevertheless stressed that Bosnia and Herzegovina had maintained a tense but non-violent condition after a brutal war, and he pointed to the Berlin Process as the most recent attempt to stimulate cooperation in a more adverse context.

Popadić used Lopandić’s overview to transition to Ambassador Igor Davidović, framing the next question as difficult and asking what the largest missed opportunity had been after Dayton, and what mistake or diplomatic opening in international relations could have been used differently. Davidović answered by asking which opportunity had not been missed, invoking Holbrooke’s maxim about never missing the chance to miss a chance, and describing a repeated failure to recognise or seize openings. He identified EU negotiations as the clearest missed opportunity, arguing that opening them earlier would have imposed a staged reform path through European standards, and linked this to enlargement fatigue in the EU and fatigue with reforms and conditionality in the region. He argued that the obstacle was not technical capacity but elite resistance to reforms because reforms would erode power, and insisted that reforms were needed regardless of membership. He criticised the EU’s indulgence, reduced the substance to the rule of law, translated it into lived experiences of corruption, and concluded that entrenched actors blocked change because reconciliation and reform would reset institutions and positions, while civil society remained the most credible carrier because it was less embedded in privilege networks.

Popadić acknowledged that Davidović had said a great deal concisely and then moved to Professor Jaroslav Pecnik with a question on historical revisionism in the region and on how Croatia’s EU accession experience had contributed to reconciliation and the struggle against revisionism. Pecnik greeted the audience and said he was glad to be in Tuzla, then pointed to contemporary Croatian public life and nationalist cultural symbols as evidence that revisionism remained contested and that resisting forces were limited. He shifted to Bosnia and Herzegovina, describing Dayton as ending the war but not providing a basis for life, while insisting that change was possible and necessary and that hardship could generate apathy or resistance. He argued that forces for change existed in civil society, parts of academia, and religious communities, invoked “hope” thinking to argue that crisis can generate solutions, and insisted that Bosnia had to remain unified, whole, and indivisible. He recalled a Prague initiative under Václav Havel’s patronage that treated Bosnia’s integrity as non-negotiable, argued that Croatian political proposals could not simply be dismissed because elites

would not disappear, and used “football language” to describe everyday identity orientation toward Croatia or Serbia rather than Bosnia. He treated debates on reform, third-entity ideas, and consociational arrangements as bargaining tools that could preserve the status quo under claims of improving one group’s position.

Popadić then turned to Tea Gorjanc Prelević with a question grounded in her civil society experience, asking how ready citizens in the region were to face the past, work on difficult topics and human rights, and what that looked like in regional practice. Gorjanc Prelević thanked the organisers, rejected the simplification of her origin by saying she was Yugoslav by origin, and noted she had arrived from Sarajevo via meetings with the Mothers of Srebrenica and survivors’ associations. She framed her work in Montenegro as an effort to defend civic society and build sustainable peace so EU accession would not reproduce institutional disorder. She cited a January survey by the Centre for Civic Education that cast the 1990s as a dark period while indicating awareness of the need for confrontation with the past, including transitional justice and war-crimes prosecution, and she linked this to candidate status and conditionality while warning that pressure could weaken as accession neared. She then presented civil society as the main reliance across the region and described the RECOM coalition as the most serious regional civic initiative, arguing that even though RECOM was not established, it produced a durable network meeting annually on revisionism, justice for victims, and accountability.

She cited joint regional reaction to the obstruction of the Mirëdita, Dobar Dan festival in Belgrade as violent prevention of cultural cooperation with state involvement and as an instance of neo-fascist practice. She cited Montenegro’s rapid coalition-building, including 111 NGOs demanding UN Srebrenica resolution co-sponsorship, and described pressures linked to Serbia’s influence and the ideology of the “Serbian world,” translating into domestic battles over Chetnik rehabilitation, Pavle Đurišić, monuments, and weak enforcement. She returned to culture through “Death to Dubrovnik,” described as a documentary theatre project based on siege testimonies circulating regionally with a related book forthcoming, and added a Croatian example in which NGOs documented the origins of “Za dom spremni” and pursued hate-speech complaints, concluding that endurance depended on unity, cooperation, and mutual support around peace, civic society, and anti-fascism.

Popadić thanked her and described the work as Sisyphean, and he returned to Professor Ćurak with a second question about the greatest obstacle to overcoming opposed narratives and competing “truths.” Ćurak argued that Dayton had become a default explanatory device, invoked as justification and proof of inevitability, while the deeper obstacle lay in subjectivity and in the permission to read the agreement through a disintegration key that sustained a narrative spiral producing no new condition. He argued that breakthroughs were possible if there was will, and described “large gestures” that could shift signs from negative to positive, citing a Banja Luka actor defending a Sarajevo theatre troupe against nationalist hostility and the Kazani memorial in Sarajevo as rare examples of willingness to mark one’s own shame. He

argued that such gestures were extinguished rather than multiplied, that allies within the political sphere were rare, and that the antipolitical sphere held more space for movement. He then referenced the “Platform for Peace” adopted by parliament, argued it did not change practice because politicians did not treat decisions as binding and citizens did not press for implementation, and concluded that without responsibility for adopted commitments society remained in unstable negative peace.

Popadić summarised this as a need to move from circular stasis to linear progress and framed it as a message for younger generations born into the spiral of narratives. He then returned to Lopandić with a question about civil society, track-two diplomacy, and the linking of people in the region, drawing on Lopandić’s experience in both formal and informal diplomacy. Lopandić argued that while the region remained trapped in unfinished past business, the environment had changed through demography, emigration, ageing, technology, and new communication forms that societies needed to absorb. He described civil society in Serbia as operating under sustained pressure, including raids, threats, and the prospect of restrictive laws, but paired this with optimism rooted in student and youth protests that produced a new narrative. He described negative regional trends through “Thompsonisation” and “Šešeljsation,” linked this to wider degradation of discourse, and referenced “Resetting the Republic” as an attempt to reject the ideology of the “Serbian world” and rebuild cooperation while confronting elites’ exploitation of fear toward neighbours.

Popadić then moved to Davidović with a question on the role of the international community in peacebuilding, asking whether reconciliation was possible without external help and whether regional actors could reset relations independently or required Brussels. Davidović argued that the international community could facilitate but could not substitute for domestic readiness, grounding this in reconciliation as sincere rather than declarative. He described international actors as cautious and interest-driven, unwilling to take responsibility for embers that might flare, and argued that domestic actors instrumentalised international engagement for domestic gain. He illustrated this through an anecdote about one of Dayton’s architects being surprised by locally convenient interpretations, and referenced sadness that the same narratives and actors persisted decades later. He argued that loud rhetoric blocked reconciliation because it threatened entrenched positions, that effective change often had to be masked to survive, and that reconciliation implied deep institutional change elites resisted, again pointing to civil society as the most credible carrier because it was less tied to the power-business nexus. Popadić closed this segment by naming civil society’s role as frequently contested by the very institutions that are meant to be creating peace.

## The Second Panel

Milica Žukić opened Panel 2 by welcoming the audience and saying she would keep the discussion more focused on the present and the future, while still returning briefly to the first panel's past-oriented frame by asking all speakers to name Dayton's greatest achievement and greatest failure. Tea Gorjanc Prelević answered that the indisputable achievement was the stopping of bloodshed, a de facto peace, while the failure was that Dayton entrenched ethnic criteria and division, leaving a structure that continued to produce political and moral pain and that needed to be moved beyond through a genuinely civic state in which civic identity mattered more than ethnic labelling. She linked this to the non-implementation of binding European Court of Human Rights judgments, treating the persistence of discriminatory electoral arrangements as a legal and political obligation for change rather than an optional reform.

Žukić then put the same question to Jaroslav Pecnik, who replied that ending the war was the clear achievement and that everything beyond it was disputed depending on vantage point. He argued that the post-Dayton configuration suited political elites across Bosniak, Croat, and Serb camps, and that it also remained politically useful to Serbia and Croatia as regional actors, because Bosnia and Herzegovina could be invoked for domestic mobilisation, especially during election periods. He added that this instrumentalisation, in his view, extended across party lines in Croatia as well, and concluded that beyond stopping the war Dayton had not delivered intrinsic value capable of securing a viable political life.

Ćurak followed by challenging the language of treating Serbia and Croatia as Dayton "guarantors," arguing that this framing implied quasi-sovereign authority over Bosnia and Herzegovina and should instead be described as a binding obligation arising from their wartime roles. He then distinguished between negative peace and positive peace, treating Dayton's achievement as the maintenance of non-violence for three decades, and its failure as the inability to build positive peace defined by freedom, justice, inclusion, human rights, non-discrimination, and a functioning state serving citizens. He argued that Bosnia and Herzegovina had not resolved what kind of state it wanted, and described the existing system as neither a functioning hierarchy nor a coherent horizontal order, but an anarchic horizontality in which decisions at one level did not bind another. He said this incoherence served incompetent and non-meritocratic officeholders, and insisted that change required new political actors and a willingness to acknowledge crimes committed by one's own community as a prerequisite for peace-oriented leadership.

Ćurak then widened the frame by rejecting the idea that Bosnia and Herzegovina should be described only through a bleak empirical register, arguing that peacebuilding

required value-based engagement rather than passive submission to “facts.” He said not everything that mattered could be measured, and described field experiences in peace workshops across the country as evidence that outside the political sphere there were durable resources of cooperation, dignity, and mutual understanding. He treated civil society’s task as reducing the dominance of the political sphere over social truth and as addressing the cultural and structural triggers of violence that remained largely invisible when violence was understood only as physical acts.

Žukić then returned to Dayton through Duško Lopandić, who argued that political community required far more than constitutional text and that implicit violence was reproduced through socialisation and education. He described Dayton as a comparatively rare and, in that sense, successful agreement because it held in conditions where many negotiated settlements collapse or diverge sharply between text and reality. He added that the balance was uneven but maintained, and argued that local communities had often found imperfect modalities to regulate relations within the system. His core critique was that Dayton produced a complex and highly dysfunctional system whose incoherence became obvious under external challenges, including EU-related processes, and he emphasised the absence of political responsibility as a central failure, describing a condition where missed reforms and lost resources produced no accountability and entrenched apathy.

Žukić then invited Igor Davidović, who described Dayton as a “zero point” that stopped war and opened a field for progress, but said Bosnia and Herzegovina had remained nailed to that starting point. He argued that constitutional change depended on political will that elites did not produce, and described the deadlock logic through the formula “one plus one minus one,” where agreement by two triggered rejection by the third, with alignments shifting but the paralysis remaining. He rejected comparisons with Belgium as superficial, arguing that in Belgium separation did not prevent institutions from functioning and rules from being respected. He said people treated home as wherever life was dignified and rule-bound, and argued that citizens across communities lacked trust in their own institutions and experienced their authorities as predatory, which helped explain emigration and the attraction of rule-of-law environments. He insisted that no external actor prevented Bosnia and Herzegovina from constructing a confederal arrangement grounded in rule of law, and returned repeatedly to the claim that responsibility could not be outsourced, using the metaphor that one could not wait for a neighbour to clean one’s yard.

Žukić then asked whether Dayton’s problem lay more in its text or in interpretation. Davidović answered in legal terms that interpretation was complex, varied by method and circumstance, and that attitudes toward Dayton shifted with political roles. He used this to argue that external actors often pressed others to undertake reforms they would reject if applied to themselves, and returned to the point that Bosnia and Herzegovina’s future depended on domestic choice rather than foreign engineering.

Žukić then shifted to whether regional political elites genuinely wanted reconciliation or benefited from tension. Tea Gorjanc Prelević answered that elites profited from controlled tension through “divide and rule” dynamics that herded voters into camps and mobilised fear, and said civil society’s role was to disrupt this mechanism despite lacking state levers. She illustrated this through the Pavle Đurišić monument episode, presenting it as both symbolic and operational evidence of state failure, and argued that extremists often acted as professionals targeting small electorates while institutions failed to enforce basic standards. She treated law and international human-rights norms as practical tools for resistance, argued that EU conditionality still mattered in Montenegro, and said reform momentum often stalled after EU accession as seen in Croatia. She suggested that civic actors entering politics was not inherently immoral because influence required institutional presence, and tied this to an insistence on active citizenship, public questioning, and accountability for officials.

Pecnik answered from Croatia by arguing that reconciliation rhetoric was tested by the treatment of minorities, especially Serbs, and he described recurring political seasons in which Serbs were made unwelcome in public space. He argued that war-related crimes framed as patriotic were treated softly while ordinary crimes were punished harshly, and presented this as a moral and legal double standard that revealed the hollowness of reconciliation talk. He criticised the maintenance of permanently “fresh” wounds as political theatre serving elites, rejected fatalistic resignation, and insisted that change required engagement and acceptance of costs rather than waiting for others to initiate action.

Žukić then asked Lopandić about Serbia’s elite and reconciliation, given Serbia’s internal polarisation. Lopandić described Serbia as a captured state where relations with neighbours were subordinated to regime survival through institutional abuse and tactical rhetoric, and said rules were being dismantled rather than followed. He treated the student movement as the principal counter-force, defined as pre-political in the sense that it reasserted elementary conditions of politics such as legality, responsibility, and limits on executive power, and he highlighted symbolic acts of inclusion, including engagements involving Novi Pazar and Bosniak students, as signals of a more integrative imagination. He argued that Serbia had regressed to a pre-political condition in which basic rules had to be rebuilt before ideological debate could stabilise.

Žukić then asked about youth as a future-oriented actor in reconciliation. Davidović answered that youth cohesion did not rest on romanticised interethnic sentiment but could form around resistance to predatory systems, and he described the governing model as mafioso-feudalism that pushed young people toward emigration unless confronted. He said he was surprised by youth refusal to leave and impressed by their public articulateness, criticised repression and institutional shame, and argued that youth movements could have regional ripple effects in unpredictable ways while he hoped for change without violence.

Ćurak answered that youth had a dual role, with many shaped by conservative contexts, long-term ethnonational rule, segregated education, and degraded public speech, while curiosity remained an irreducible source of hope that could undermine separation once direct contact occurred. He illustrated this through experiences of workshops and contact that dissolved fear, argued that Bosnia and Herzegovina functioned as a crucial European indicator because it concentrated diversity into a single political problem, and said the country's continued existence under weak integrative conditions still suggested malleability rather than fatalism. He criticised organised production of ignorance that sustained nationalism, and argued that civil society had to counterbalance political terror through networking, projects, and sustained conversation that normalised civic relations.

Davidović closed by insisting that everyday life contained less hatred than political rhetoric implied, that serious national incidents were not pervasive beyond sporadic acts, and that ordinary interaction across lines continued, suggesting that tolerance was often stronger in society than among elites and that the political class remained the principal obstacle.

**Former Ambassador Prof. Dr. Duško Lopandić**

## **Serbia Needs a New Regional Policy**

Within the renewal of foreign policy, Serbia first needs a new regional policy. The current government has, by conducting a policy based on encouraging hyper-nationalism, the theme of a “Serbian world,” revisionist victimisation of Serbian history, and the constant provoking of tensions with neighbours, shown an essential inability and unwillingness to improve neighbourly relations in the Western Balkans space in a more serious and long-term way. An “arsonist-firefighter” constantly incites tensions and then “calms” disturbed relations in the region, falsely presenting itself as a source of stability. Therefore, a change of government in Belgrade is necessary for a new neighbourly policy which should be based on the concept of mutual trust, solidarity, turning one’s back on the past, and joint action toward integration into the European Union.

Despite a series of existing initiatives and forums for cooperation, key questions of mutual relations in the Western Balkans have remained unresolved, and the stability of the region is in the first place based on external influence and the corresponding action/presence of the EU and NATO. The basic goal of a new, democratic initiative for regional cooperation should include strengthening relations through the development of a collective feeling of security in the Western Balkans space. Collective fear is a source of mistrust and, conversely, mistrust encourages collective fear. In a world that is changing quickly, the peoples of the Western Balkans can overcome fear and anxiety by strengthening mutual cooperation through the creation of regional institutions for that purpose, cooperation on the path toward the EU and NATO, etc. Unlike previous attempts to reach an improvement of trust through economic and/or technical initiatives, a New Framework of Regional Cooperation (Framework) should be set on two pillars (political and economic) with an emphasis on cooperation in questions of security and defence with solid institutionalisation.

Permanent institutions would ensure that cooperation is not dependent on personal relations at the top, as was the case with the former “Craiova group” (Romania-Serbia-Bulgaria-Greece) or with the current “Open Balkan.” Possible disputes in the interpretation of obligations and agreements would be resolved through judicial arbitration. Strengthening regional ties would be politically supported also by creating a permanent parliamentary assembly (in perspective). In the framework, partners from the Balkans who have not yet become EU members would be included. As has already been emphasised, launching the framework should be one of the main elements of Serbia’s new foreign-policy strategy. Cooperation of the “six” in the Western Balkans should also be developed on the principles of respect for equality and reciprocity,

promotion of the rule of law, human and minority rights, cooperation in the field of culture, etc.

In the first phase, the framework initiative could include three components:

**Institutional:** the formation of a permanent political-institutional Framework of cooperation (summits of the six Western Balkan partners at the level of prime ministers, a permanent secretariat, a judicial body–arbitration) - the institutional pillar of cooperation,

**Security:** the conclusion of a framework agreement on cooperation in the areas of defence, internal security, and the judiciary (the political pillar of cooperation),

**Economic:** the conclusion of a framework agreement based on the principles of non-discrimination (of natural and legal persons from the Western Balkans) and the four freedoms of movement (people, goods, capital and services) with confirmation of the achievements of all previous relevant regional initiatives which would receive additional impetus through this process (RCC, Berlin process, Open Balkan, CEFTA, the Transport and Energy Community, etc.) - the economic pillar of cooperation.

The members of the framework would jointly commit also to encouraging individual and/or collective entry into the EU by 2030/2034. The EU would have observer status in the framework. NORS should encourage and accelerate the process of phased and full membership inclusion of all members in the EU, which becomes one of the key priorities of the European Union itself. However, the framework should continue to function even after the entry of individual members or the entire region into the EU. the framework would also conclude a special collective arrangement on cooperation in the area of defence with NATO. In the next phases, the three components of cooperation could be improved with many new areas (culture, education, science, etc.), bodies (a council of ministers, a parliamentary assembly, specialised agencies, such as a joint research centre, a development bank, and the like) and conventions (protection of human and minority rights, etc.) and the like.

The existence of the framework would also represent an additional impetus to the improvement of bilateral relations between the members. Its formation would have significant indirect regional and geopolitical effects: It would improve regional stability and collective security in a time of new tensions and international disturbances; it would confirm the integrity of all participants (without entering into the question of mutual recognitions) and especially strengthen the position of North Macedonia and the internal stability of BiH; it would encourage contacts and formalised cooperation of non-NATO members such as Serbia with NATO; it would facilitate dialogue and normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo as well as broader Serb-Albanian reconciliation; by relativising border divisions, it would make pointless ideas about redrawing borders on national bases or themes of creating a “Greater Serbia” or “Greater Albania.”

**Prof. Dr. Nerzuk Ćurak**

## **Culture of Peace in (Post-)Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina**

On the eve of Hamas's attack on Israel, 07.10.2023, President Joe Biden's adviser Jake Sullivan published a text in *Foreign Affairs*, *The Sources of American Power: A Foreign Policy for a Changed World*, with the viral sentence that the Middle East is quieter than it has been for decades (Indeed, although the Middle East remains beset with perennial challenges, the region is quieter than it has been for decades. (23:2023)). The magazine had only just entered distribution, and Hamas carried out its murderous attack, forcing the editorial board of that respectable foreign-policy magazine, at least online, to withdraw the embarrassment that remained in the printed edition as a testimony that most analytical observations in our mega-accelerated age, even by the best-informed, are merely passing judgment on an appearance.

If I were, in a similar tone, to put forward the almost axiomatic conviction that the Dayton state has never been calmer, or else that it has never been more conflictual, will the near future, which begins at this moment while I speak, refute me, can it refute me? Either to the joy of most of our people, because peace finally materialises as an irreversible process, confirming the correctness of the analytical judgment that Bosnia has never been calmer, or to the joy of militarist scoundrels, because behind thirty years of peace there rolls a conflict that will culminate in some terrible murderous gesture, sufficient for any authoritarian and oppressive regime from the country and the region to begin the tyranny of revenge. It makes full sense to ask which future is closer to us.

Although a multi-decade unstable peace nevertheless points to the Dayton Agreement as a peace contract, because the weapons of organised military formations are at rest in the country and around it, it is hard to treat the loose Dayton peace form as peace in the final account, as absolute certainty that there, behind some corner of the divided country, the Bosnian-Herzegovinian god Mars is not growing.

In Kant's *Perpetual Peace* the first preliminary article seems, 230 years after its first publication, to refer precisely to the Dayton Agreement: "No treaty of peace can be held to be such, if it contains within itself the seed of some future war." That does not mean that war will occur, but that the peace treaty for Bosnia and Herzegovina, although it has spread across our country as a powerful peace trajectory, possesses the germ of possible violence, is not advisable to ignore, especially when we face the obviously confronting political demands of opposing political structures, of which none has realised the war aim, and the recent geopolitical transformation of the world seems to encourage nationalist and clerico-nationalist cartels of economic, political, military and cultural power to embark on yet another attempt at the destruction of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Their knowledge is shallow, their understanding of the big picture is provincial, so many signs along the road they read infantilely: our time has come, the

time for our Sudetenland, one annexation to the east, one annexation to the west, and what remains can remain as a surplus that can be prosperously controlled, either by economic ultimatums or by crimes; who knows, perhaps by new crimes of genocide as well, similar to Gaza, Sudan, Myanmar, Srebrenica and other fields of people's death. A time has come in which such statements are not fictionalisation of reality, but a warning about networks of power that summon the reality of nationalist fictionalisation and the defeat of plural, unified Bosnia and Herzegovina. What helps the anti-Bosnia and Herzegovina paradigm?

It is helped by the permanent presence of war through its absence and the constant absence of peace through its presence. War is not and is, peace is and is not. Ambivalence as a way of producing a peace treaty. And so, we citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina live our dual state in which, thirty years after the end of violence, we have still not dared to undertake a mutual internal recognition in which we will not be named by insulting names and epithets of evil, and which will stop centuries-old matrices of cultural violence. It is time for us to live cultural peace. A peace in which there will be no Vlachs, Turks, balija, false faiths, cunning Latins, soaps and perfumes, and that from the highest places of power, but a peace in which the Bosnian-Herzegovinian spiral of plurality will triumph, a spiral whose different parts will form a moment of unity. Difference as a moment of unity and not as a forced moment of division. How to reach that?

By admitting to ourselves, on every side of all our rivers, that our most certain future is nevertheless the one burdened by Dayton. All other possibilities, at least in the history of short duration, are only fogbanks, of nationalist or civic provenance, because they wave at reality, contributing to further floundering in the permanent present, instead of trying, within the framework that produced minimal peace, to widen the area of the peace struggle for a better Bosnia and Herzegovina, to the benefit of all our people. As we have generally acted in the previous decades, with repulsive strategies of agreed policies of enmity, which cannot be controlled forever, we slip away from the arrow of time.

The arrow of time is turned toward the future, which, unlike the past, will surely come. Yet, because during the twenty-first century we stopped Dayton in its integrative strength and enabled the latent triumph of unrealised disintegrism, time has been spent on the battle for and against Dayton, in which those who are against Dayton say they are For, and those who are For Dayton say they are Against. Thus the future has been lost and static time without an arrow of time has been produced. Namely, time in Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina is circular, it does not advance beyond the insoluble squaring of the circle, because dominant policies do not need time. For dominant policies it is best when time stands still, when the key unit of time is organised feebleness in producing laws, which we see every day in the parliaments of our exhausted country. Therefore, petrified structures of power do not allow the future, they do not allow a new, expansive logos in which we will finally, both within politics and within anti-political activity, begin dialogues, trialogues and quadrilogues about mutual

recognition that builds the state as a service of people and not as a captive of myths and corruption.

Let us therefore open a series of “construction sites of civiness”, in which the Dayton political installation will not be an obstacle and an alibi for not opening toward one another. In which the international community, with its harsh support for ethno-nationalists from Cutileiro to today, has not allowed political representation beyond archaic three-headedness. And then outside politics that same international community significantly supports civil society which is against those ethno-nationalist policies. Perhaps science has done the least of all instruments of rationalised civility in producing a Bosnian-Herzegovinian logos of hope, so that is a task for all of us, to stop floundering among like-minded people. That means to stop paying attention to the limits of Dayton and simply to live.

Why?

Life in Daytonia has two dimensions. One I call “Dayton everydayness” (daily life) which refers to the routine survival of misery, to bare life and the hard struggle for a decent existence of the civic multitude; the other dimension I call “Dayton everyday life” (everyday life) which, unlike Dayton everydayness, takes place in the zone of the political, in which the routine of Dayton misery is routinely forgotten as an everydayness that happens to someone else, that other for whose abstract national interests the political structures of the country allegedly fight, while they live their life outside Dayton everydayness, in the comfortable zone of Dayton everyday life, peeled away from the everydayness of homo sacer. (A good example for this “Dayton everyday life” is an image that has been returning to me for years. A few years ago the then Japanese ambassador to BiH was returning by official car from Mostar and ran into a jam caused by members of the “Dayton everyday life”.

I think it was Thursday and politicians were rushing back from Sarajevo, with a sea of official cars, with rotating lights turned on, and an indescribable jam was made that greatly irritated the ambassador from the land of the rising sun, who was so angry that upon arriving in Sarajevo he scheduled a press conference to complain, as a representative of one of the richest countries in the world, about those terrible privileges that politicians in BiH have, driving under rotating lights, even if in the hierarchy of power they are assistant to the assistant of the deputy minister. I remember that appearance and the resignation: we give BiH so much money, and in Japan the right to an official car and rotating lights have only the emperor and the prime minister! That is the unforgivable alienation of the Dayton political class. No political organisation will even consider my request that a law be passed in small, poor BiH on abolishing state vehicle fleets, on reducing thousands of cars to seven cars: for the Presidency of the state, the Parliament of BiH, the Council of Ministers, the entity parliaments and the entity prime ministers. I am convinced that the political party which eventually does this as part of its political programme in the near future, but not

partially, but permanently and legally convincingly, can win many votes of the Dayton plebs, can create social conditions for the constitution of real cross-entity authority.)

That everyday life of the political class, peeled away from reality, is the real third entity in which time stands still and the only goal of the dominant political oligarchy is that time stands still. The meaning of progress is the struggle against this third entity and the annulling of the deep existential difference between the everydayness of the pauperised multitude and the everyday, radically alienated life of the political cartel.

A poet would say the future is here, it only needs to be recognised and singled out. We cannot recognise it, because we live in circular time. The circle must be exited, curiosity to once again get to know our Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks..., our historical neighbours, is the energy missing as a barrier in the awakened age of global post-fascism. We must once again set out toward one another, we must create conditions so that at such large conferences we have as many of our colleagues as possible from all parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. We are still far from that goal, because fear and existential blackmail are the greatest ally of circular time and multi-decade stillness in false movement. Unfortunately, as we supposedly move away from 21.11.1995, as we move away from the war, the hope that people will be better, that they will love their country more and more, that they will be real citizens of that country, that constitution-makers will respect their Constitution, that is all worse and worse...

Where I am nevertheless an optimist: Bosnia and Herzegovina simply is stronger than everything its nationalists want for it, because it is far more than the sum of its ethno-nationalist policies. Simply, it is so. And that is hard to measure. Thus, simply, it exists. Go down to Dayton everydayness and feel, despite the evildoers, that it is so: from Mostar to Trebinje, from Brčko to Orašje, from Banja Luka to Tuzla, from Sarajevo to East Sarajevo: hospitality, cross-entity ethno-national solidarity, good-nature, humour, faith in small things... And perhaps the world, after great geopolitical upheavals, returns to small things. I am convinced one should not renounce that, that these are signs of everydayness of long duration and that in the final account they can obtain political legitimisation as well. That is a future unburdened by Dayton. It is so. And I hope I will not, like Jake Sullivan, have to stop Reuters in some tomorrow, defeated before the global triumph of the neo-fascist international which, with the support of small fascists from our alleyways, in various ways tries to destroy our "it is so". And it is strong like the earth to which we are bound by the umbilical cord.

**Prof. Dr. Jaroslav Pecnik**

**Preparatory obstacles on the road to good-neighbourly relations between BiH, Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia**

The break-up of Yugoslavia and the bloody wars fought in Croatia and BiH (we should not forget Slovenia either, though fortunately for the Slovenes the wartime events, destruction, including the number of victims, were nevertheless significantly smaller than in Croatia, and of BiH not to speak) left a devastating mark on all sides, and many wounds, despite the passage of time, have (still) not healed. Let us not forget, it was, as much as wars of liberation, just as much a tragic civil war from which no one, absolutely no one, came out clean. The source and beginning of the war are not disputed, but the circle is not exhausted and closed only with Milošević and his phalanxes as the greatest, but not the only, culprits.

Therefore, to talk about who is more or less to blame for all those horrors, after everything, simply no longer makes sense (at least not to me), because when, in the city where I live (Osijek), Serbian shells were “rattling”, and that lasted almost a year and a half, every day, of course you are angry at “the Serbs”, because you are frightened, weaker, and powerless, but the only thing I know, I know that I never hated; perhaps the reason is that no one close in my family died during the war, unlike the Second World War, where two uncles and my mother were imprisoned in Jasenovac and miraculously survived. My mother through an exchange of a group of partisan women for captured German officers, one uncle by escaping to the partisans, while the other spent the entire war in the camp and remained alive, probably because he was neither Serb nor Jew, but a Slovak with golden craftsman’s hands, and such people were always lacking in the camp. But as soon as the war ended, he moved with his family to Slovakia, and when, in 1968, on my way to Prague (where on 22 August I woke up to a view of Soviet tanks on the city streets), during a visit to his home in Bratislava, I asked him what it had been like in Jasenovac, even after so many years he simply could not speak about it; I only remember well that he told me that all that had happened, that terrible fratricidal war in Yugoslavia, would be repeated.

Of course, as an then conceited philosophy student in Zagreb, with the experience of taking part in the student revolt, I thought it was impossible that such a thing could happen in “my” country and that my uncle, already advanced in years, did not know what he was talking about. God, how foolish I was and how right my uncle was, but there is nowhere, unfortunately, out of this skin. And why do I tell all this, simply because I think the roots of our common evil lie in a not-so-distant past we inherited, with which we did not know how to cope, or at least not in the right way, and for which we still pay a price today, until yesterday in blood, and now in hatred, conflicts, nationalist (xeno)phobias, religious exclusivisms, cultural intolerances of various forms

and contents, ambitions to appropriate what is чужђе, to domesticate it, or if that does not work, then to reject it with contempt and disgust as less valuable, and so on.

And the various stories with which we wish to justify all those myths of ours, nationalist cults and stereotypes, to overemphasise them, to highlight that they make us, in relation to others, better and more worthy, are mere delusions with which each side, for itself, must openly, honestly, and sincerely, to the end, confront itself, critically examine itself, and that is always a painful and arduous mission for which one must have strength. And we so often lack it. Therefore I must emphasise that I will speak about the questions of facing the past exclusively from a Croatian perspective, because I have no direct experience of what happened in BiH, in Serbia, later in Kosovo (although I visited wartime Sarajevo in the spring of 1994 and spent a week in it, on various grounds, seven unforgettable days of pride and fear), but after living under constant shelling by the JNA and Serbian paramilitary units (mostly Arkan's men) in war-torn and besieged Osijek (1991–1992), every theorising about these things has long since sickened me, it is simply false and hypocritical, as is, after all, every quasi-intellectual one-upmanship in order to show, in “those matters”, that we are smarter, better informed, more widely read than the interlocutor. And that we see better and further than others what we in fact have no idea about.

Facing the past, the reckoning with historical revisionism, is above all a question of morality, a civilisational question, a measure of human humanity and decency. Therefore, the beginning and end of all our stories must, at least in this our context, be sought and found in the symbols and narratives of antifascism, in the broadest sense of the word, and within that enormous diapason are placed all the other countless notions and contents that in various ways, often without their own fault, made our lives meaningless by subjecting them to voluntarisms of different kinds, of which the most often mentioned, that is, nationalist, chauvinist one, is only the tip of a great iceberg floating beneath the surface of the sea of madness.

It resembles the famous song of Jewish fighters during the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto in 1943 (“Zog nit keymol”), which ends with the lines: “This song was written in blood, not in pencil / This is not a melody sung by birds in the wild / This song was sung by people amid walls they were breaking / People with revolvers in their hands.” Antifascism is a lasting value, which today is being thoroughly devalued from the positions of right-wing clerofascism and extremism, but not with arguments, rather with (in)artfully tailored labels with which one clumsily balances with truth and facts, turning them into a revisionist and populist torrent of lies, with one single intention: to defame and thus weaken collective antifascist memory and, in the end, to turn the defeated fascist forces of evil into victims and the real historical victors. Of course, in doing so, to demean as much as possible, and as bestially as possible, all those who oppose it, because they defiantly warn that loud anticommunists want to revise the history of antifascism by equating it with Stalinist and dogmatic communism, while covering up their own crimes.

And indeed, much can be reproached to communism and to communists; they themselves committed many sins and crimes, but one must be fair and say this too: communists, whatever anyone thinks of it, contributed the most to the victory over fascism and, in the struggle against fascism, bore the greatest sacrifices. Without them and their contribution, Nazifascism would not have been defeated. But, as we see, that victory was not final; is it possible that after all it turned out to be Pyrrhic? Despite everything, they raise their heads again, and we had the opportunity to experience various forms of that dragon on our own skin, both in our own environment in which we live and in our neighbours', so is it then strange that, for example, Croatian and Serbian chauvinists understand each other so well, even respect each other, even when they clash with each other, which of course does not mean that one would not shorten the other by a head, but that "on some other basis".

In any case, fascism has returned to the political scene in new forms (Umberto Eco), with a series of old themes and methods, and the biggest problem is that today there is not, as earlier, a strong antifascist movement to oppose it. And therefore the (good-neighbourly) task of this historical moment, not only in our once common spaces but also worldwide, is to strengthen and conceive new antifascist forces and values; otherwise the world again rushes into a new great senseless war. The fuse was lit in Yugoslavia, fortunately, despite immense victims and destruction (the symbols Vukovar and Srebrenica), it did not catch fire, but Ukraine warns us how history, with unbearable ease, can repeat itself. Now both as farce and as tragedy.

And every man is "thirsty for beauty, hungry for love", as one beautiful, elegiac Dalmatian chanson says, capable and ready for the highest flights of spirit, but also (more often) for the greatest crimes and the dirtiest filth; everything depends only on which path, in what way, he wants to realise the dreams he sings about. How to recognise that in time is an eternal question without an answer.

## **Bosnia and Herzegovina, 30 years since the signing of the Dayton Agreement**

Time in BiH seems, in a political sense, to have stopped, although thirty years have passed since the signing of the Dayton peace agreement, which, in that country burdened with enormous problems, prevented further terrible wartime destruction and bloody interethnic reckonings, yet in mental terms essentially little, or almost nothing, has changed. Although such a state of “frozen conflict” suits no one, because it prevents real social and economic, in fact normal, development of the country, the ruling entity-level, nationalist-structured elites, with minor deviations, nevertheless support one another (and understand one another well), and in this they have the support of various important international factors, the so-called guarantors of peace and stability, who in and through BiH continue to wage their own “wars” among themselves, thus taking far more care of their own interests than of the interests of the country which, before international forums and the community, they undertook an obligation to protect and help in the post-war restoration of interethnic trust, the democratisation of society, and the building of stable and efficient political institutions.

Therefore, today more than ever before, because everyone must be aware that time is not working for BiH and its citizens; a unified, whole, and indivisible Bosnia and Herzegovina requires a thorough transformation of methods of action and ways of behaviour, but precisely within the emphasised framework to which the smart and well-intentioned warn, and the fools and ill-intentioned ignore, that is, within the “unified, whole, and indivisible” state and community of all three constituent peoples, and also of the others who live in it. BiH is, without any exaggeration, the most tenacious and most complex regional Gordian knot, and of broader international politics as well, which cannot, nor should, be solved with a sword-stroke; every hasty solution (and there have been and will be such attempts in the future), as has been clearly shown, is doomed to failure and, in the end, at some moment of major international crises, can lead to the renewal of war conflicts or at least fierce local, even armed, conflicts, which would amount to a catastrophe that would bring no good to anyone. After all, the war in BiH during the 1990s and the bloody break-up of Yugoslavia confirmed that more than clearly.

But, as we know, no one (especially we on the “mountainous Balkans”) ever learned anything from history; we showed ourselves to be exceptionally bad pupils, but excellent repeaters of our own mistakes and omissions. True, “by hand”, patiently, with democratic means and with great respect for political opponents, this complicated unwinding of the Bosnian Gordian knot would certainly take (too) long, but it seems there is no better alternative; all shortcuts have already been tried and none produced the expected good and effective results. On the contrary, they only worsened the already tragic situation in the country.

Nevertheless, pessimism, or bare statements that BiH is simply such and a God-forgotten and cursed land, make no sense, simply because they are not true and not factual; BiH can and must do better, for every situation there is a solution, only in all three entities there must (I am convinced it can) be created a critical mass of citizens who have had enough of general thievery and slovenliness, lies and selfishness of the ruling nomenclatures, and who will gather political, but even more broader (now passivised) civically oriented social forces and thus initiate a movement of genuine political and social changes in which different, even ethnic and religious interests will be properly respected and harmonised, and in which, in the first place, there will be the human being as citizen, and not as Serb, Croat, or Bosniak.

A great role in this can and must be played by progressive forces within BiH, especially within civil society (which is not as feeble as it seems at first glance), but of which there are also in other segments of society (parts of the academic as well as religious communities, etc.), especially among the young, although these forces and movements are still insufficient, often “crumbled”, heterogeneous; the mere fact that they exist is of great importance. They must grow stronger, with the support of the international community, but also of neighbouring countries in the region, above all Serbia and Croatia, which not only have the right but also the duty to care for the wellbeing of BiH, because a large number of their compatriots live in it.

Of course, such, the current authorities in Serbia, and to a large extent the current Croatian government, are in no position for that, because in a good part of the political mainstream of these two states they still indulge unrealistic nationalist resentments of Republika Srpska that will join Greater Serbia, or ruinous phantasmagorias about Herceg-Bosna that will, perhaps not formally, but in every other sense, (become) an integral part of Croatia, which in fact, to a large extent, has already been realised. The factual state of affairs in that part of the West Herzegovinian terrain confirms this unambiguously. Let us not forget, it was not the Hague Tribunal that “liquidated” Herceg-Bosna; that idea, which Franjo Tuđman personally and fervently supported, was on his side “sacrificed” in favour of resolving, that is, extinguishing the Serbian rebellion in Croatia.

Thus, there are still at work, more or less visible, or hidden, but in any case strong forces that disintegrate a whole BiH and clearly deny the merely declarative statements of Belgrade and Zagreb that they are “committed” to the care for BiH’s stability and that thereby they also take care of their own, and broader regional stability. If that were, at least partly, true, the situation in BiH would not be as tragic as it has been for all these thirty years.

Finally, everyone, in BiH but also in the region, would have to face the evident fact that the world, politically and in every other sense, has essentially changed; a completely new paradigm is at work, which has almost nothing in common with the times and the world after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The world is passing through enormous, turbulent

changes, and it is as if here, in our once common spaces (I would exclude Slovenia, which even in Tito's Yugoslavia always knew what it wanted and knew how to fight for its interests, and we should simply respect that and learn something from them), we do not want to see it, or cannot recognise it.

Now all that I have only slightly indicated, I am aware, for a range of reasons resembles utopia, but from utopia, as the great philosopher of hope Ernst Bloch taught us (just as the theologian of hope Jürgen Moltmann), the most powerful humanistic ideas are born; one only needs to work stubbornly on them and believe that they are still possible today, and to use Tertullian's maxim, "Credo quia absurdum", as a direction in the (realisation) of that noble goal. For BiH it is crucial, at least for a start, to find a link, a path of cooperation between the civic and the national, and to all the mockery of numerous professional sceptics who will, as soon as they hear it, wave their hands and declare it a "mission impossible", one should not pay too much attention; of course everything useful that is heard from various sides should be accepted, but one must set out and go by a path other and different from the one traced by nationalist elites, because apart from "blood, tears, and sweat" they brought nothing good. Of course, except to themselves and their hajduk bands, who in the general turmoil and poverty managed splendidly and became the new Croesuses of our small-town, Kleinbürger world, in which masses of disenfranchised Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks, deprived of a normal life, simply vegetate.

Of crimes, corruption, the criminalisation of societies, the general collapse of fundamental moral and civilisational values on all sides and in all environments of our formerly common state, I will not even speak, because that has already become a worn-out, banal commonplace of our ever more burdensome reality; and all that, at every step of the expected and desired "NEW path", must be kept in mind, that is simply the *conditio sine qua non* of Bosnian-Herzegovinian survival both as state and as society.

In a strictly political-practical sense, the key question of the moment is the question of the so-called third entity. About this numerous discussions have been conducted until now, and certainly will continue; recently that theme was opened by Max Primorac (a man of Croatian roots, originally from BiH) from the Heritage Foundation, close to the Trump administration, which many, not without reason, interpreted as "testing the ground" of the White House for a change in its policy toward BiH, which until now insisted on strict respect for the agreement reached in Dayton, in which the (to)date political order of the country was established, which is, mildly speaking, extremely complicated, expensive, and inefficient. How tangled the governing structure in BiH is clearly illustrated by the data that a state with fewer than four million inhabitants has 149 ministers in 13 governments, nine presidents and vice-presidents each, 635 members of parliament, etc.

Whether Dayton was only a temporary option by which further escalation of the war was prevented, and after a couple of years it should have been refined, that is, changed, we can only guess, because there is a multitude of different statements on that question, but the fact is that it is still in force (although it has been gradually refined and adjusted to the imperative of crises that dominated the Bosnian-Herzegovinian scene), that it is a framework around which consensus must be achieved if it is to be changed.

Until recently the seemingly untouchable leader of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, whom the High Representative of the OHR, Christian Schmidt, after much wrangling, nevertheless removed from the political throne, constantly disturbed spirits with stories not only about separating RS from BiH, but also about dividing the Federation of BiH into a Bosniak and a Croat part, to which the Bosniak party, as always, fiercely opposed, but (only seemingly) surprisingly also a part of the Serb opposition in Banja Luka that opposed the Croat entity, to which Dodik until now, for purely pragmatic-ideological reasons, “held the ladder”, and which the overwhelming majority of Croats in the Federation have for years been dreaming of and longing for.

So far all Croatian attempts around the idea of a third entity did not meet with the support of the Bosniak side, and the Americans, as a decisive factor for maintaining the stability of “Dayton” BiH, resolutely rejected it, believing that it would lead to new conflicts and the definitive dissolution of the common state, which again is openly advocated and promoted by Dodik and his entourage. And now the essential question is: have the Croats, led by Dragan Čović and the BiH HDZ, finally waited for the right moment to revive the story of the third entity and realise it, regardless of all possible consequences, or have they in fact renounced it and, aware of the harsh reality, use that story only as a political weapon, a tactic in strengthening their own party, pre-election positions. It is hard to assess, it is probably a combination of moves and projections, but regardless, one must realistically see where both positions lead. Both have their open fans and hidden advocates in the Federation, in BiH as a whole, but also in Croatia, the EU, and, as we see now, in the USA.

The fate of Dayton is today more questionable than yesterday; in any case that document proved successful in stopping the war in the ex-Yu areas, but as a peace agreement many would say (extremely) bad, because as the basis of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Constitution it generated a series of negative things on the political and social scene there. Just one example: Croats are frustrated that (also) Bosniaks choose for them a member of the BiH Presidency and therefore the vast majority do not recognise Željko Komšić as their legitimate representative in that most influential political body of the country and demand that they themselves decide on their candidate. But, under the existing Constitution, nothing about the election to the Presidency is disputed, and so for years tensions have lasted between Croats and Bosniaks (more precisely between the HDZ and the SDA), who do not want to give up a right that, by the logic of the more numerous electorate, works in their favour and derives from the highest legislative act.

How to resolve the dispute: in favour of achieving the general interest, one should rise above personal, party, and narrowly national interests and conflicts. And respecting the electoral will of the other people would be a good sign of mutual trust, that is, that they sincerely want to overcome mutual frustrations and fears. Unfortunately, nationalist elites have not, and it seems at no price want to, pass that test of trust, and therefore the question imposes itself: what else must happen in BiH for citizens to understand that precisely as citizens they must do something radical in their own interest. It is worth recalling an old rule of Tomáš Masaryk: when a democratic society has problems, then it must remove those problems, and not democracy.

## **Former Ambassador Dr. Branka Latinović**

### **Lasting peace in the Balkans**

International security, military stability, and political stability are interdependent, with political stability in this context understood as good relations between states, which is at the same time the general framework for cooperation in all other domains. At the same time, political stability within states remains an important factor of a state's international position and influences stability and security in a wider context, because a state that faces internal instability cannot represent a reliable and active partner.

A state of lasting peace, which is established after armed conflicts, as a rule is the result of peace negotiations and agreements, and the accompanying arrangements, including those in the military field. It is beyond doubt that political stability as a general framework in the European and regional context depends on military security. The very system of the European security architecture, built within the OSCE, is defined as an area of cooperation in the politico-military dimension.

Soon after the end of the Second World War, relations between the victorious sides of the anti-Hitler coalition in Europe sharpened, resulting in the emergence of the Cold War, accompanied by the bloc division of Europe and the creation of two powerful military alliances, NATO and the Warsaw Pact. That so-called Cold War atmosphere was accompanied by strong ideological divisions between communism and imperialism, between a democratic West and a non-democratic East. In addition, there was strong distrust, largely a consequence of unresolved border issues in Europe after 1945, that is, territorial questions. For the then USSR, priority was the recognition of the border on the Oder and Neisse, which the Red Army reached in 1945 on its march to Berlin. They remained within the territory controlled by the Warsaw Pact, that is, by Poland as one of its members.

The absence of convening a peace conference in Europe after 1945, like the one in Versailles in 1919, and of concluding a peace treaty, and the emergence of bloc division, with only a few European countries outside the military alliances, neutral and non-aligned countries, deepened distrust, undermined stability, and created an atmosphere of fear of a new war in Europe, a condition that lasted for years and was accompanied by varying intensity. All this was accompanied by a strong arms race, both conventional and nuclear arsenals, between the USA and the USSR; an intense ideological confrontation, which existed not only between capitalism and communism, but also within the communist movement itself. Everything was additionally reinforced by cases of military interventions by the USSR in some of the Warsaw Pact members, where the then Soviet leadership believed that the leaderships of those countries had deviated from the agreed path, as in Hungary in 1956 and in then Czechoslovakia in 1968, when Soviet tanks entered Budapest and Prague.

Soviet interventionism within the Warsaw Pact is otherwise known as the Brezhnev Doctrine of limited sovereignty and it further strengthened distrust in Europe.

The first country in Europe that, in the period 1948–1953, was permanently exposed to the risk of military intervention by the USSR was Yugoslavia, because of the well-known events of 1948 and the conflict of the Yugoslav party leadership with Stalin. On the Yugoslav northern border in that period several Soviet divisions, including armoured ones, were permanently stationed. Nevertheless, Moscow did not intervene in Yugoslavia, as it did later, in the case of interventions in Budapest in 1956 and Prague in 1968. The Yugoslav public reacted strongly to the Soviet military intervention in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in 1968. Given the growing distrust, Yugoslavia reacted by introducing the concept of General People's Defence, or an armed people, as a form of response to a possible foreign military intervention in Yugoslavia.

Yugoslavia, from time to time, also found itself in a state of increased tension on its western borders, with Italy, because of the unresolved question of the border toward Trieste. In one period it was also with Greece, during the civil war in that country. The SFRY overcame those issues successfully, and in a short period normalised relations with Greece. Very soon after that it agreed the Balkan Pact with Greece and Turkey, which is considered a kind of model of Yugoslavia's rapprochement with NATO. Yugoslavia also later successfully resolved the border issue with Italy by signing the Osimo Agreements in 1973. That was the time of Brandt's Ostpolitik, when he knelt in Warsaw before the monument to the victims of the Holocaust, and then in Moscow signed the recognition of the border on the Oder and Neisse. All of this, known as the policy of détente or the easing of tensions in Europe, created the conditions for convening the CSCE/OSCE Conference and for signing the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, which defined that borders in Europe are inviolable and cannot be changed by force.

In Helsinki in 1975 new foundations of European security and cooperation were set, based on trust, partnership, and cooperation of the participating states of the CSCE/OSCE, defined as a space from the Atlantic to the Urals, acting beyond blocs and respecting the political independence of states. The European security architecture that from the beginning of the 1970s of the last century was patiently and over a long time built and shaped, as an original multilateral security system in Europe, is based, like the Helsinki Final Act itself, on TRUST BETWEEN STATES. Mutual trust was recognised as the pillar of building the European security architecture, which is based on building measures known as CSBMs, confidence- and security-building measures in Europe. On the same premises the other system is based as well, arms control known as the CFE of 1990, with its essence being numerical limitations for five categories of armaments, reduction of surpluses, and inspections as the main method of verifying the implementation of the CFE, as well as troop reductions in Europe. This opened the process of disarmament in Europe. The OSCE adopted a number of other complementary documents in support of strengthening the implementation of the previous two agreements, where the Code of Conduct in the politico-military sphere has particular importance.

The European security architecture rests on these two main pillars, confidence- and security-building, whose essence is control of troop movements in Europe and of exercise activities, and the reduction of conventional armaments in Europe. It was built after détente, the reduction of bloc confrontation, and the signing of the Paris Charter of the CSCE/OSCE, November 1990. In other words, the policy of easing opened the process of political stability and thereby created the conditions for adopting a common security platform as the basis for a comprehensive, cooperative system of security in Europe.

This system was successfully built, implemented, and functioned with varying intensity, until Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. Although the implementation of measures from the system of the European security architecture was endangered even before this, first due to Russia's suspension of the CFE in 2007, and then its withdrawal in 2022, other measures were applied. The system survived and work was done on its improvement in line with changes that occurred. The war in Ukraine, which is still ongoing, showed that the warning system for preventing the outbreak of conflicts through the mechanism of "non-notified military activities", as defined by the Vienna Document CSBM/OSCE, again proved non-functional, ineffective, and insufficiently binding. Trust had been undermined for years, and with it the entire concept of the previous security architecture of Europe. Therefore, the construction of a new concept of security architecture will face a number of new challenges. It is encouraging, however, that the OSCE itself, within whose framework these new negotiations will, certainly, be conducted, has political will, human resources, and a vision for leading those negotiations. Significant engagement of the OSCE in a post-conflict area followed after the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords, 14 December 1995, and the obligations that arose on the basis of Annex 1B, Regional Stabilization, and Articles II, IV, and V of that Annex. Those obligations related to the Parties to the DPA, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and the FR Yugoslavia, that is, Serbia and Montenegro.

Negotiations on the basis of Article IV, that is, the Agreement on Sub-Regional Arms Control between BiH, Croatia, and the FR Yugoslavia, the OSCE organised within a short time, after the signing in Paris. These negotiations were held in Vienna in the period 4 January 1996 to 6 June 1996, and the Agreement was signed on 14 June 1996 in Florence. The OSCE, within a short time, appointed Personal Representatives for leading negotiations for Articles II and IV and for expert assistance to the Parties, and provided expert, organisational, and other support for their conduct.

Negotiations on Article IV related to achieving the Agreement on Sub-Regional Arms Control between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and the FR Yugoslavia, Serbia and Montenegro. The mandate of the negotiations was established in Article IV, which precisely defined that the Agreement on Sub-Regional Arms Control should "establish a balanced and stable level of armed forces at the lowest possible level consistent with their security requirements". In accordance with the mandate, the Agreement established numerical limitations for five categories of limited armaments, defined

methods for reduction of armament surpluses, procedures for conducting inspections to control its implementation, and obligations of submitting annual information, that is, the transparency of the process itself.

The Agreement was modelled on the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, CFE, signed at the CSCE Summit in Paris, November 1990, between the then two blocs, NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Many definitions, provisions, procedures, and categories of limited armaments were taken from the CFE. The Agreement signed in Florence on 14 June 1996 established a military balance in the region in relation to the number of armaments and the quality of armaments that the Parties possessed at the time of signing. Thanks to the assistance and support that the OSCE and the members of the Contact Group (except the Russian Federation) provided to the Parties in training military experts in order to enable them to implement the Agreement, other obligations were also fulfilled on time. That training was carried out according to CFE standards. Namely, during the negotiations, training and enabling of military personnel for its implementation took place separately. The Contact Group also helped the establishment and technical equipment of the Verification Centres of the Parties.

The implementation of the Agreement on Sub-Regional Arms Control has been a success story for thirty years, thanks to the full engagement, dedication, and timely fulfilment of obligations by the Parties, and above all the engagement of military experts. In that way they decisively contributed to stability in a sensitive area, such as security, and thus created the conditions for political stability between the states of the region. Although the successful implementation of this Agreement continues, this year the thirtieth anniversary of its signing will be marked, and due to the changed geopolitical context and the fact that the Parties are modernising their military capacities by introducing new types of armaments, but in different quantities and dynamics, all of which is accompanied by strong rhetoric. The successful implementation of the Agreement on Sub-Regional Arms Control is the result of strong commitment and political will of the Parties, cooperation at a high level, and the existence of an atmosphere of openness, transparency, and trust.

The Agreement itself regulates the definition of limits for five categories of armaments that are limited, while questions of quality and the process of modernisation of armaments are not regulated. Nevertheless, the existing modernisation carried out by all Parties should not be considered a new arms race in the region, because that process takes place within the established limits. As such it is not in question. What calls into question the spirit of the Agreement and undermines trust is inappropriate political rhetoric, non-constructive language, coming from certain leaders and media, which negatively affects the political climate and trust in the region.

Current relations in Europe are a consequence of the crisis of trust that has existed in Europe for a longer time. It is the result of Russia's distrust regarding NATO's expansion to the East, as well as fear, above all of former Warsaw Pact members, of

Russia's ambitions to restore its earlier sphere of influence over the eastern part of Europe. Russia's aggression against Ukraine deepened that distrust, because it points to Russia's ambition to restore spheres of interest that would be defined at some new "Yalta".

## **Former Ambassador Dragana Filipović**

### **Politics and the process of reconciliation in the Balkans**

#### **Reconciliation as a path to the progress of a post-conflict society**

Military doctrine teaches that a war ends when military operations end. From a legal point of view, a war ends with the signing of a peace agreement. Politically, from the standpoint of the reality of (co)existence in the Balkans, both approaches are incomplete, because a war is essentially over only when reconciliation takes place between the opposing sides, of which there have been more than one in this region. Reconciliation is a process longer than the duration of the war and longer than negotiations on peace agreements. The open question is whether, as in the case of the Balkans, it should last three decades, what the reasons for that are, and what could reverse that trend.

A strategy of reconciliation between states implies the existence of political will among state elites to engage actively and constructively in facing the consequences of conflict and to recognise common interests of importance for the future. How does one arrive at a prevailing attitude and conviction that what connects the peoples and states of the Balkans is more important than what divides them?

Numerous international organisations, but equally importantly NGOs, have dealt with establishing mechanisms for reconciliation in post-conflict societies, investing not only expertise but enormous material resources. Perhaps part of the answer as to why the reconciliation process in the Balkans has lasted so long is that, for the success and sustainability of this process, it is necessary to have democratic functional institutions, free media, and to overcome the identification of the interests of the country and the people with political parties and personalities. The lack of all of the above led us into the conflicts of the 1990s, which produced enormous suffering and left distrust toward the “intentions of neighbours”.

#### **Mechanisms for the process of regional reconciliation**

The recognised key elements for the reconciliation process in the Balkans are bringing perpetrators of war crimes to justice, that is, individualising responsibility for them, strengthening regional economic cooperation with the common goal of joining the EU, and connecting young people as the main driving social force for building long-term stable relations among the states of the region.

The Hague Tribunal and the Berlin Process are two different but complementary approaches to the reconciliation process in the Balkans, from legal facing of the past through bringing to justice those responsible for war crimes, to focusing on the common future through revitalising economic cooperation in the region. Cooperation through the Berlin Process was meant to strengthen the common regional market with the goal of achieving the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people, which leads to infrastructural connectivity of the countries of the region.

From the Thessaloniki Agenda of 2003, which confirmed that the future of the region lies in the EU, to Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013, the Balkan states had the option of joining the EU, with numerous adjustments to European standards through internal reforms, which for most of them was encouragingly foreseeable in time. A significant slowdown in the EU accession process then followed, caused not only by a lack of reforms in the candidate states, but also by the strengthening of right-wing forces across Europe during the migration crisis, which turned Brussels's priorities toward reforming the EU itself. The proclaimed motive from Brussels was the need to confront economic problems, redefine EU priorities, and find a model of an effective response to growing challenges and threats in the world, alongside strengthening the efficiency of European institutions.

Numerous concrete initiatives were launched across the region, focused on identified problems between certain states, with the aim of keeping the EU rapprochement process, despite the slowdown, relevant. In a complex political environment, non-governmental organisations and civil society once again became an important line of defence against the growing manipulation of Balkan citizens by political elites, using a vocabulary of hatred instead of dialogue, initiating ethnic divisions and threats.

The "Open Balkan" initiative ("mini-Schengen"), launched in 2019 by Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia, represents an attempt by these states, in the absence of progress toward the EU, to independently improve economic cooperation through the free movement of goods, services, people, and capital. After the good practical effects of this initiative, which also contributed to reconciliation, there came a shift in the political priorities of these states in line with the EU's new readiness to revitalise enlargement. Although this readiness of Brussels was "awakened" by the war in Ukraine and the strategic need to place it, alongside Moldova, under the political and security umbrella of the EU, the Western Balkans, for reasons of EU credibility as well, had to be part of that process. In that context, Montenegro stood out as the most serious candidate, followed by Albania (a projection that negotiations with the EU will be completed by 2027–2028, subject to change). This moment of the EU "opening the door" toward the Balkans initiated competition among the candidate states to find themselves in the "narrowest selection" and use the political momentum, while forgetting the importance of the obligations they had undertaken.

For the reconciliation process in the Balkans, of particular importance is the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina based on the Brussels and Ohrid agreements, which passes through phases of ups and downs, and the normalisation of relations is considered a condition for EU membership. The dynamics of this dialogue in fact reflect heavy decades-long political manipulations and ambiguities of all those involved in this process, including the EU, which for years has not found a way of mediation to realise the establishment of the Association of Serb Municipalities, which is Pristina's obligation. This is, unfortunately, a missed opportunity for a key step toward reconciliation between Serbs and Albanians. The reconciliation process between Belgrade and Pristina will require the commitment of new generations of politicians to, above all, building trust between these peoples.

Although the Dayton Agreement led to the establishment of peace in BiH, it did not enable the functionality of the state nor erase ethnic divisions. The complexity of the political, economic, and sociological situation in BiH complicates constitutional reforms and BiH's progress toward the EU. The common regional market of the WB6 should enable the political narrative in the region to focus on integration in all aspects of cooperation and dialogue.

The transition from "peace in the Balkans" to EU membership is slow and affects reduced optimism among citizens that EU membership is possible. Still, the realistic expectation that Montenegro will become the 28th EU member should provoke constructive competition toward the common goal of the Western Balkans states. A political sensitivity of Serbia's official representatives is observed, reinforced by a public anti-EU narrative as a way of justifying Serbia's lagging and its reforms in relation to the proclaimed priority of national policy, accession to the EU. The EU Growth Plan, as a mechanism of financial benefits and rewards to candidates for EU membership, based on achieved reforms, could also be a mechanism for accelerating the reconciliation process in the Western Balkans if it were to set this as a concrete priority.

For the reconciliation process in the region today, a "functional peace" is not sufficient, where conflicts are replaced by economic cooperation while political tensions at the same time persist or grow. The political reality of Southeast Europe, the energy crisis, and geopolitical changes that define new priorities for the main global actors, including the EU, are an opportunity for political elites in the region to base their ratings, in the absence of measurable substantive progress of states, on provoking national feelings and cultivating an "immediate threat" and endangerment from neighbours. The role of free media would be of exceptional importance for "liberating" the public from fake news and apocalyptic narratives across the region.

The Council of Europe and the process of reconciliation in the region

The Council of Europe is a platform for promoting dialogue and fundamental freedoms, among which is the right to life. In the preamble of the Statute of the Council of Europe it is stipulated that “all member states shall pursue peace based on justice and international cooperation for the purpose of preserving human society and civilisation”. It advocates an adapted approach to the issue of reconciliation and just reparations to victims in post-conflict societies of its member states, because this is key for achieving long-term peace.

Unlike the UN and the OSCE, this pan-European regional organisation has so-called “soft power”, and the most important mechanism it has for promoting reconciliation and compensation for damage to victims of armed conflicts is the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. This Court deals with disputes between member states and in its practice has resolved cases arising from the consequences of the occupation of Cyprus by Turkey, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, and violations of the rights of Crimean Tatars after the annexation of Crimea by Russia.

All Western Balkans states are members of the Council of Europe, but they were admitted only after the end of the conflicts in the Balkans. Still, the Court dealt with issues arising from the breakup of the former Yugoslavia (for example, the issue of the loss of tenancy rights after Slovenia’s declaration of independence) and the consequences of armed conflicts in the Balkan region (the right to private property, the consequences of exodus, war crimes, the right to a pension, the rights of displaced persons). Additional mechanisms of the Council of Europe through which a contribution to reconciliation is provided are GRETA, which deals with the fight against human trafficking, and GRECO, whose focus is the fight against corruption.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, in its resolutions, advocates strengthening the mediatory role of the Council of Europe, which would apply only in the case of member states and on the basis of the consent of the parties to the dispute. For that purpose, member states are called upon to ratify the Convention for the peaceful settlement of disputes. Still, in practice, mediation between member states under the auspices of the Council of Europe has so far been more an attempt for this Organisation to offer its expertise in the context of the war in Ukraine and to find space for greater political influence in the future.

The youth of the region, an option for stability

Political tensions in the Balkan region are often deliberately initiated by certain political elites, with the aim of maintaining ratings based on insecurity and heavy memories and scars from the past. New generations of young people across the region, however, show a positive approach to cooperation in all areas, without inherited prejudices. An interest is observed among the youth of the region in direct contact that bridges institutional barriers and achieves cooperation in different areas and a better quality of life. For them reconciliation opens new jobs in the region, and for the young population the priority is economic progress of the society in which they live, based on European

standards and freed from endemic corruption. The youth of the region are not ready to give their trust to political leaders who offer promises but not their realisation; they are pragmatic and guided by defined priorities that they primarily want to achieve in the states where they live. At the same time, their mobility on the European labour market is their advantage. They cultivate a culture of professional, political, and individual responsibility and understand that the rule of law means stability and functional institutions.

Young people of the region, from academics to entrepreneurs, have operational and educational capacity and, together with civil society, are the best chance for healing from political divisions and the exhaustion to which the region has been exposed for decades

## **Serbia – EU: Cornerstones of Cooperation**

Relations between Serbia and the European Union, despite political tensions, have for more than two decades rested on three strong integration mechanisms:

- The single market (the logic of the Single Market)
- Sectoral integrations – transport and energy
- Cross-border cooperation (CBC) as an instrument of institutional convergence

These mechanisms operate at three levels: macroeconomic, sectoral and local. They show that European integration is much more than a political slogan. It is a long-term process of gradual incorporation into the European legal, economic and institutional framework.

### **1 The single market – the economic gravity of the EU**

Relations between Serbia and the EU rest on strong trade ties established as early as the end of 2000 through the Autonomous Trade Measures (ATM), which the EU granted to the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia within the framework of the post-conflict stabilisation of the Western Balkans.

The ATM represented one of the broadest unilateral trade preferences the EU had ever granted. Serbian products received almost free access to the EU market, with exceptions for a limited number of agricultural products, such as sugar, wine and beef.

From then until today, trade relations have developed in parallel with political relations, from unilateral preferences to institutional association and membership negotiations.

#### **Development of Serbia's trade relations with the EU:**

Phase	Period	Nature of relations	Character of trade	Political framework
ATM	from 2000	Unilateral preferences	EU opens its market	Stabilisation and assistance
Interim Agreement	2010–2013	Partly contractual	Beginning of reciprocity	Partnership
SAA	from 2013	Contractual relationship	Free trade area	Institutional association
Negotiations	from 2014	Accession process	Alignment with the <i>acquis</i>	Preparation for membership

Today, the EU accounts for around 60% of Serbia’s total foreign trade. In the period 2010–2024, Serbia’s exports to the EU increased several times over. The EU is not only a political objective. It is Serbia’s economic gravitational zone.

At the same time, regional trade through the CEFTA agreement complements this framework, but it has been more exposed to political tensions. This clearly shows the difference between the stability of legally grounded integration and politically sensitive regional arrangements.

## 2 Sectoral integrations – transport and energy

Transport: from a regional study to a European network

The wars and sanctions of the 1990s left the Western Balkan region infrastructurally isolated. European corridors were not defined through the region, nor were there mechanisms of regional coordination.

In 2002/2003, the EU launched the Regional Balkans Infrastructure Study (REBIS) in order to:

- identify priority transport corridors,
- define investment needs,
- prepare projects for financing by international institutions.

REBIS laid the basis for the establishment of SEETO in 2004, and then of the Transport Community in 2019, which represents the formal integration of the Western Balkans into the EU legal framework in the field of transport.

### Evolution of integration in transport

Instrument	Period	Nature	Logic of integration
REBIS	2002/2003	Study	Mapping of priorities
SEETO	2004–2019	Regional institution	Coordination
Transport Community	from 2019	International treaty	Legal integration
TEN-T extension	from 2023	EU regulation	Inclusion in the pan-European network

Today, corridors through Serbia are formally part of the European transport network (TEN-T). The infrastructure of the Western Balkans is planned together with EU infrastructure. In other words, infrastructurally, the region is already deeply integrated.

### **Energy: the deepest form of legal integration**

The Energy Community, established in 2005, represents the deepest form of legal integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU legal system before formal membership. Serbia has been a member since its establishment.

The objective is the extension of European energy legislation, the *acquis*, to the region: market liberalisation, unbundling of production and transmission, regulatory independence and gradual decarbonisation.

### **Phases of integration in energy**

Phase	Period	Focus	Challenges
Establishment of the market	2006–2014	Liberalisation, regulator	Dominant state control
Regional integration	2014–2020	Market coupling	Limited competition
Green Agenda	from 2020	Decarbonisation, ETS	Share of thermal power plants, investments

Serbia has adopted a significant part of the legislation, but implementation remains a challenge due to large investment needs and the social implications of the transition. Chapter 15, energy, measures precisely the political readiness to change the energy model.

### **3 Cross-border cooperation – integration from below**

## Cross-border cooperation programmes (CBC)

The Republic of Serbia has participated in cross-border cooperation programmes since 2004. Its very first participation showed a high level of readiness of institutions to prepare quality projects and successfully implement approved activities.

On the basis of experience from the first funding cycle, Serbia initiated the introduction of a special instrument of cross-border cooperation between candidate countries. The European Union accepted this initiative and, from 2007, established the so-called IPA–IPA cross-border cooperation programmes.

### **Objectives of cross-border cooperation**

- improving good-neighbourly relations
- encouraging regional socio-economic development
- jointly addressing challenges in border areas
- supporting the process of accession to the European Union

### **Programmes in which Serbia participates**

- Hungary – Serbia, from 2003/2004, active
- Croatia – Serbia, from 2007, active
- Bulgaria – Serbia, from 2007, active
- Romania – Serbia, 2007–2020, continued through INTERREG
- Serbia – Bosnia and Herzegovina, from 2007, active
- Serbia – Montenegro, from 2007, active
- Serbia – North Macedonia, from 2007, active

The right to participate in cross-border cooperation programmes is held by local self-government units, regional development agencies, public enterprises, education and healthcare institutions, civil society organisations, chambers of commerce, small and medium-sized enterprises in certain calls, as well as other non-profit institutions. The key principle is partnership. Each project must have at least one partner on both sides of the border, which ensures that cooperation is real and not merely formal. In this way, the European logic of cooperation is introduced directly at the local level, through joint planning, a joint budget and shared responsibility for results.

## **Priority areas of financing, 2004–2027**

- local economic development and SMEs
- employment and labour force mobility
- education, skills and youth
- tourism and cultural heritage
- environmental protection and climate change
- small infrastructure
- healthcare and social protection
- risk and crisis management
- innovation and research
- capacity strengthening and good governance

In the period 2004–2023, more than 7,000 project proposals were submitted, while around 1,500 projects were financed, with a total value of approximately EUR 400 million. Total EU allocations by programmes from 2004 to 2027 are estimated at approximately EUR 600 million.

The financed projects included, among other things, the construction and reconstruction of small border crossings and access roads, joint tourist routes and visitor centres, laboratories and research centres in border regions, waste management and wastewater treatment systems, equipping hospitals and health centres, training for young people and the unemployed, as well as the development of digital services of local administrations. Although individually often “small”, these projects collectively changed the functional connectivity of border areas.

CBC programmes cover around 70–75 local self-government units, approximately 40% of the population and around 45% of the territory of Serbia. In this way, cross-border cooperation goes beyond the framework of individual projects and becomes an instrument of regional cohesion, institutional modernisation and political stability in the region.

## **Developmental and institutional effects**

In addition to financial effects, CBC programmes have contributed to:

- the adoption of the NUTS classification in accordance with EU statistical standards,
- improving the availability of statistical data through the Analytical Service,

- strengthening strategic planning at the local level,
- amendments to the Law on the Budget System establishing the possibility of national
- co-financing of cross-border cooperation projects from the national budget,
- the application of EU procedures in public procurement and financial management.

The National Assembly has just launched the procedure for adopting the law on the establishment and functioning of the system for managing cohesion policy. The aim of the law is to prepare Serbia and its institutions for the implementation of programmes and projects financed from the EU Cohesion Fund. This law is important because, for the first time, it establishes a legal basis and institutional framework for managing cohesion funds so that Serbia, immediately upon accession to EU membership, could use funds that contribute to reducing differences between regions. On the other hand, its adoption contributes to the accession negotiations themselves, namely to the closing of Chapter 22 (the draft of this law was supposed to be adopted in 2021 according to the plan of the government. It is a key law for the closing of chapter 22 - regional development)

### **For the end: integration in practice**

The influence of the EU on the Western Balkans has not relied primarily on political conditionality, but on structural mechanisms of integration. Through the single market, sectoral communities and cross-border cooperation, the EU has gradually embedded its legal, economic and administrative framework into the region, creating integration in practice before formal membership.

The European Union is not a classical international organisation, nor an alliance based exclusively on political loyalty. It is a community of law, markets and common policies, in which sovereignty is not lost, but shared in order to achieve a higher degree of stability and predictability. This is precisely why integration requires time, because it implies the adaptation of institutions, procedures and modes of governance. European integration is not a process of renouncing national interests, but of articulating them within a broader legal and economic space.

Serbia's European integration is not only a process of negotiations. It is a multilayered transformation through the market, sectoral policies and local governance.

Membership is not imposed. It is built, corridor by corridor, law by law, project by project. Experience shows that the process of integration is not one-directional. Candidate countries are not only recipients of rules, but also actors which, through technical initiatives, regional proposals and administrative innovations, can contribute to shaping concrete instruments of cooperation. Partnership between national institutions and European structures functions in practice as a dialogue: on the ground, through projects, through joint working groups and through constant alignment. Within

this space of cooperation, domestic initiatives also emerge which, when well argued and aligned with the European framework, become part of the Union's broader policy.

The generations that are today entering the public, private and civil sectors are already working in a space that has, to a large extent, been shaped by Europe, often without even noticing how many standards, procedures and opportunities are the result of this long process of integration.

EU integration is not an event. It is a process.

**Dr. Jelica Minić**

## **A flower in the ashes**

“I love you more than hate loves war.”

American obituary, U2, 2026.

According to various definitions of reconciliation, which takes place and has taken place in different circumstances, between perpetrators of violence and victims, those who violated human rights on the individual level, on the level of different social or ethnic groups, on the level of entire nations after armed conflicts, and those who suffered, it represents both a goal and a process. Reconciliation is necessary in order to enable a normal life for new generations in a normal environment, in order to democratise society and in order to turn it toward the future. The entire community must participate in it, so that cycles of violence and conflict do not repeat. Because, as the Irish group U2 says, “hate loves war”. If hatred is constantly maintained and fed, sooner or later it leads to frictions and conflicts without end. At this moment, the inability to sincerely encourage reconciliation has led to frightening wars in Europe and in its Middle Eastern neighbourhood. Many wars are currently being fought in the world, but also in another way and within certain states themselves, as currently in the USA, where hatred and intolerance are pulling that great country into a kind of new civil war.

In the small space of the so-called Western Balkans, which has been captured by that name as the remainder of the former Yugoslav space after Slovenia and Croatia entered the European Union, with the addition of Albania, which has been geopolitically packed into the same “cage” surrounded by EU and NATO members (in which three of those six countries are also full members), an ever smaller population lives, currently the size of one larger world capital, and it is rapidly dwindling. Young people are leaving. The reasons are not only and not primarily economic. These are societies in which hatred is one of the pillars of power, hatred toward neighbours and toward other ethnic communities in society, which is fed, or in special cases for commercial-political reasons systematically suppressed, as in the case of the bilateral relations between Serbia and Hungary. A good example of reconciliation that goes from the top, so to speak by order, and gives certain results, but not deep foundations, because it has not grown into a broad and sincere process that includes a large part of social actors on both sides.

A second case of political-commercial reconciliation inspired and led from the top took place through the “Open Balkan” project, where through a series of ordinary and practical projects primarily in the economic domain, and here and there through cultural cooperation and the creation of legal conditions for freedom of movement of citizens in the Serbia–North Macedonia–Albania space, a positive atmosphere among citizens was created, which implied “good Albanians” from Albania and “hostile

Albanians” from Kosovo. However, the project soon withered, leaving some interesting and partly bizarre results such as “Wine Vision of the Western Balkans” (the largest wine fair in Southeast Europe), at a time when the authorities in Serbia spread fear among citizens that Albania, together with Croatia and Kosovo, is developing a military alliance whose aim is to endanger Serbia. Reconciliation did not last long.

Hatred becomes an important and constantly present narrative, creates a sense of constant endangerment, obstructs the development of democracy, because it constantly summons a kind of wartime state, and in the meantime institutions collapse, the rule of law is increasingly endangered, corruption and organised crime flourish. Because the smokescreen of hatred toward others covers everything, including violence toward one’s own citizens. It is as if unfinished or lost wars return home to finish their destructive work over their own citizens. That is why the young leave, because such an atmosphere implies every day filled with tensions and “enemies” pouring out from everywhere, judging by the regime media.

And then a mass student protest happened in Serbia, which drew in and inspired a significant number of citizens and professions, education workers, employees in the judiciary, farmers. Industrial workers from books about class conflict do not exist, because there is no industry, which has mostly been destroyed, except mostly foreign investments that come and go and move toward sectors where labour is cheap. The exception is the arms industry or the IT sector, which can hardly lead change through political struggle. But they can join it. In a fragmented society, with exclusively party loyalty as the only stable basis for survival and any kind of advancement, there is no place for new generations longing for a normal life in which hatred is not a daily command.

The strength of will and conviction and the mass character of the student movement created a new, parallel reality in Serbia. After two terrible tragedies in May 2023, at the “Vladislav Ribnikar” Primary School and in Malo Orašje and Dubona, where in two days more than thirty children and young people were killed or severely wounded, and then the collapse of the canopy at the renovated Novi Sad railway station, in November 2024, where sixteen mostly young people and children were killed, resistance flared against negligence, lack of care, irresponsibility, impunity, corruption, and the atmosphere of violence in society. Above all the young rose up, because in all the listed tragedies they were the main victims of a society that destroys its institutions and main resources and builds its survival on demolishing every perspective for new generations.

The parallel reality manifested itself through the introduction of direct democracy among the rebelling student population, through activism (students in every village) and the nurturing of solidarity among students and between them and their professors and education workers in general, with great support from citizens. Then followed the “conquering of Europe”, by bicycle to Strasbourg and running to Brussels. There has

never been consensus around the European Union, but part of the student population has always been oriented toward it.

The demands of the student movement were at first: (1) the publication of complete documentation on the reconstruction of the Railway Station in Novi Sad, (2) the uncovering and punishment of the attackers on students and citizens, (3) the dropping of charges against those arrested at protests, (4) greater budget allocations for faculties.

Then the “Student Edict” was proclaimed, as a new social agreement on the basic values advocated by students, on freedom, the state, justice, youth, dignity, knowledge, solidarity, the future, which was adopted by tens of thousands of students and citizens from all over Serbia, on the streets of Niš, in March 2025. The next step was political, students demanded early elections.

In all of this, the students carried out a wondrous act of reconciliation, by supporting the struggle of all citizens of Serbia for the stated values. As a natural result, Bosniaks of Sandžak, after more than 35 years of endangerment, accepted Serbia as their state and joined the student project whose basic goal is the creation of an orderly rule-of-law state where everyone has equal rights. Students from Novi Pazar walked across Serbia travelling to Niš, Novi Sad, villages and towns, and students and citizens from all over Serbia flooded Novi Pazar, giving one another support. Such reconciliation, inspired and achieved by the youth of Serbia, has, since the break-up of Yugoslavia and all the wars that followed, never been achieved by any political party, state institution, church, or education system. There were only courageous individuals and groups, mostly in the non-governmental sector, who set for themselves as a mission reconciliation with the peoples in the newly formed states with which Serbia went to war and with its own minorities. The authorities in Serbia obstructed this reconciliation. That is why this achievement, as one of the most important legacies of the student movement, must be defended without pause in order to endure.

In this short essay two different models of reconciliation are set against one another, which have produced different results and have different prospects for sustainability. One is a model on utilitarian grounds imposed by the authorities and its future most directly depends on changes in political constellations among the engaged elites. The other is a model of spontaneous reconciliation by the will of students and citizens and it has much greater chances to take deep root, especially if democratic change comes in Serbia.

It was therefore two models in which the main differences lay in goals, actors, and the ways the process unfolded. In the first case it was about utilitarian goals, in the second about values. In the first case what was crucial was action from above (state institutions and para-state actors), as opposed to a process that began from below (students and other citizens). The first model is a state construct, while the second is a spontaneous process.

And let us return to the beginning. Reconciliation between Serbs and Bosniaks happened through a spontaneous process of common struggle for freedom, justice, equality. A struggle led by students, and citizens joined. It was not the goal and purpose of that struggle, and yet it naturally arose from it and can develop further only if the other goals are achieved. In non-democratic societies reconciliation has no long-term perspective even if it unfolds by order of the authorities.

There is also a third model. In many societies reconciliation went through joint action of the government, parliament, political leaders, media, non-governmental organisations, courts and prosecutors for war crimes, educational institutions, historians, cultural workers, public figures, religious leaders and youth organisations. In Serbia that model could not come to life except in traces. Thus the student revolt, like the struggle of David against Goliath, brought an unexpected result.

The terrible wars taking place near us, terrible crimes and victims, everything terrible that more than a quarter of a century ago was happening in our space, make this already long-lasting student revolt and the enormous energy behind it look like a wondrous flower that has sprouted on the ashes of the world.

**Ms. Tea Gorjanc Prelević**

### **Between the Rattling of Weapons and the Voice of Conscience**

When the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, and the Croatian Prime Minister, Andrej Plenković, recently exchanged sharp words over the arming of their states, many in the region recognised in it, with unease, the rhetoric of war. Mutual accusations, demonstrations of military power and nationalist tones from Belgrade and Zagreb clearly reminded us that the relations between Montenegro and Croatia show where the key unresolved conflict in recent Balkan history lies.

Although the situation today is militarily entirely different from that of the nineties, because of Croatia's membership in NATO, this does not prevent political elites from exploiting old conflicts and invoking new ones. The Balkan arms race indicates that relations in the region still languish in the shadow of the wartime nineties, and that the path towards reconciliation and stabilisation is, at best, uncertain. The rattling of weapons encourages hatred towards neighbours, aided by Serbia's failure to face the responsibility of the JNA, which was commanded from Belgrade, especially for the destruction of Vukovar, as well as for the siege of Dubrovnik and its surroundings.

In such a regional framework, Montenegro is in a particularly sensitive position. A small state between two rival poles, in which both Croats and Serbs live, also has its own burden from the wars of the nineties, which it spent as a blind follower of the warlike campaigns of Serbian President Slobodan Milošević. However, after the distancing of Montenegrin Prime Minister and President Milo Đukanović from Milošević in the second half of the nineties, relations between Montenegro and Croatia advanced so much that Croatia even lost interest in prosecuting Montenegrins for war crimes. Yet lately, under the influence of Serbia, relations between Montenegro and Croatia have undergone a serious cooling.

In June 2024, the majority in the Montenegrin parliament adopted a resolution on the genocide in Jasenovac, because of the insistence of the parties of the ruling coalition that are close to Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. The essence of that resolution was a direct provocation for Croatia, whose government otherwise regularly marks the anniversaries of the liberation of that Ustasha camp. Zagreb reacted quickly and sharply: three prominent Montenegrin politicians, the President of the Parliament Andrija Mandić, Deputy Prime Minister Aleksa Bečić and MP Milan Knežević, were declared personae non gratae on Croatian territory. This move, without precedent in the mutual relations of the two states, clearly showed how irresponsible political calculation can bring down what had been built for years.

The consequences of the cooling were not only symbolic. In December 2024, at the intergovernmental conference in Brussels, Croatia blocked Montenegro from closing

Chapter 31 on foreign, security and defence policy, for which it had been technically ready, and this after a standstill of seven years. The message could not have been clearer: Montenegro no longer has free passage towards the EU as long as it does not settle the accounts from the past with Croatia. Zagreb then also delivered to Podgorica an informal diplomatic document, in which it requested the resolution of the question of ownership over the school ship Jadran, mutual delimitation at Prevlaka, additional compensation for the victims of war crimes, the change of the name of the swimming pool in Kotor named after a guard in a camp for Croatian prisoners of war, the finding of the missing and the return of property to the Croatian minority on the Montenegrin coast.

It seems that everything that could be pulled out of the drawer has been pulled out, and even more than what Croatia had previously shown readiness to forget. All these sharpenings in relations at the top in no way contribute to the population of the two neighbouring states, which is oriented towards one another.

What makes the context especially complex is that Montenegro cooperated with Serbia in its war for territories on the soil of Croatia in 1991–1995, under the pretext, first, of defence from an “attack” from Croatia, then of defending Yugoslavia from Croatia’s independence, and, finally, of defending the endangered Serbian minority in Croatia. Montenegrin units actively participated in the siege of Dubrovnik in 1991–1992, in the shelling of the UNESCO-protected Old Town and in terror against the civilian population. These notorious historical facts, for which both the Montenegrin Prime Minister and the President of the federal state from Montenegro expressed regret, were nevertheless long swept under the carpet, passed over in silence in textbooks, avoided in official speeches and minimised in the media. Thus, while Podgorica and Zagreb discuss ownership over ships and the border, the fertile ground for the worsening of relations lies deeper, in unacknowledged guilt.

In such an environment, where, under the influence of Belgrade, the blackmailed government in Podgorica wanders from nationalist rhetoric to forced diplomatic calculations, Montenegrin civic society actively invests effort in connecting peoples through facing the facts of an inglorious past.

Montenegrin non-governmental organisations, Human Rights Action and the Centre for Civic Education, once marked in Montenegro twenty years since the siege of Dubrovnik, and since then every year, together with the Croatian NGO Documenta, they recall that siege and its hardest day, when the Old Town was shelled on 6 December 1991.

Human Rights Action recently published the book *Memories of War: The Siege of Dubrovnik 1991–1992*, a collection of personal testimonies of participants in the war from both sides, who experienced first-hand both wartime propaganda and the military disarray in the JNA, but also its destructive power. The book is the fruit of cooperation with director Petar Pejaković, founder of the drama studio Empty Space, who, on the basis of

conversations with more than thirty participants in the war and other historical documents, made the theatre play “Death in Dubrovnik”, which HRA produced thanks to the support of a UNDP and European Union project. By giving voice to the participants in the war, HRA and Empty Space did something the Montenegrin state never had the courage to do: it looked its own responsibility in the eye, without evasion and diplomatic euphemism.

The play belongs to the culture of remembrance, as opposed to the widespread culture of forgetting, and its intention is to confront the public in the region with the truth about the war fought in Dubrovnik and its surroundings. The bitter irony is that the play was performed in Montenegro around ten times in only four cities, because in most Montenegrin cities it is not welcome for chauvinist, ideological and politicking reasons of the authorities that govern them. Outside Montenegro, the reception was completely different. At the Marulić Days in Split in 2025, the play won the award for best production as a whole and was called a “rarely seen theatrical masterpiece”; Anja Pletikosa was awarded for dramaturgy, and at the FIAT festival in Podgorica, Maša Božović and Pavle Prelević received awards for acting roles. The play was performed at festivals in Skopje, Sarajevo and Belgrade.

The play caused an especially strong resonance when it was performed in Zagreb, and finally in Dubrovnik itself, as part of the ZNA-DU festival in March 2026. Both the Zagreb and Dubrovnik audiences rose to their feet and greeted the ensemble several times with applause, and after the two-and-a-half-hour performance many also stayed for a conversation with the creative team. In reviews, the play was emphasised as an important step towards normalisation, reconciliation and rapprochement, but also towards preventing the repetition of history. One Dubrovnik critic concluded that it was a play “which opens wounds so that they may heal”, while another critic explicitly paid tribute to the authors: “well done to the neighbours for this play, which perhaps means even more to them than to us. It is always beautiful in a world like this to feel like a human being and realise that there are still people around you.”

The fact that Montenegrin artists brought a difficult and sincere confrontation with an inglorious past precisely to Dubrovnik, the city that their compatriots shelled, gives it the dimension of a symbolic act of reconciliation that no courteous diplomatic note can replace.

The third pillar of HRA’s engagement is academic: an analytical, joint text by three historians from Zagreb, Belgrade and Podgorica was also published, illuminating the circumstances of the attack on Dubrovnik, placing it in the wider context of the breakup of Yugoslavia, the functioning of the chain of command and the responsibility of the military and political leadership. It is precisely the synthesis of these three approaches, personal testimony, artistic interpretation and scholarly analysis, that makes this

essentially peace-oriented engagement methodologically mature and socially potentially very useful.

All these activities acquire particular meaning when viewed in the context of Montenegro's ongoing European integration. Croatia, as a full member of the EU, has the right and the mechanism to block Montenegro's progress as long as open questions remain unresolved. Yet what diplomacy seeks as technical conditions, the prosecution of crimes, the finding of the missing, the regulation of property disputes, cannot be fulfilled permanently and sincerely without a thorough social confrontation with the past. You can sign agreements, close chapters, exchange protocolary statements of goodwill, and even pay out money. But if society as a whole does not accept its role and responsibility, all of this remains an empty administrative formality condemned to repeat itself one day in a new form and under a new pretext. European integration without genuine reconciliation is not integration at all, it is only a façade behind which a potential new conflict smoulders.

And while Vučić and Plenković exchange threats about weapons and military power, and Montenegrin-Croatian relations remain tense and full of mutual suspicion, the civic initiative of HRA and Empty Space shows the only alternative that has a future. Reconciliation in the Western Balkans is not possible without truth, and truth is not possible without the courage to say it aloud, regardless of how painful and politically inconvenient it is. In a region where history is too often instrumentalised for the needs of daily politics, where selective memory is used as a weapon, and forgetting is forced as state policy, civil society organisations preserve what is most valuable: social conscience and the message that one can and must learn from the past. This is not only a humanistic imperative. It is also a very concrete precondition for a stable, peaceful and prosperous future of the states on the territory of the former Yugoslavia.



European  
Movement  
Serbia



# District of Reconciliation: Reconciliation Reflections *Newsletter 1*

