

“Finding a Balance”: Dealing with Past, Present and Future

Interview with Adnan Hasanbegovic, Nedžad Horozovic,
Sanja Deankovic, Tamara Smidling (Staff of CNA Sarajevo)

Martina Fischer

What does “Dealing with the Past” mean in your understanding? What is CNA’s approach in Bosnia and the post-Yugoslav region?

Adnan Hasanbegovic: Now I do have a feeling of certain peace, because there is no direct violence, but it’s still not a lasting peace. It’s not war, but it’s not peace, either. The traumas are still very strong, and all kinds of divides are still very deep. Confronting the past means reviewing – where did we perform acts of violence, where were we, what have we been doing? Taking responsibility for everything I’ve done. There are many levels of responsibility: individual and collective, the responsibility for accepting being a part of it all in the first place, responsibility for overstepping into violence, because we’d led this war in a truly bloody manner. It’s important for us to be heard and to try to hear each other.¹ In my view, this is a necessary precondition and part of the peacebuilding process. We think that people from the entire region should face the past and see what happened and should think about their own roles during the war and their guilt and accordingly take responsibility for it.

417

Why should people deal with the past at this very moment? Would peace work in the post-Yugoslav region be impossible without this?

Tamara Smidling: In my view it is absolutely necessary to deal with the past right now because I think we still haven’t changed the value base in our society. I see many similarities in the situation in 1991 and in 2005 on many levels. “Dealing with the Past” for me is not only dealing with the war crimes.

¹ The first minute of the interview has not been recorded for technical reasons. Adnan Hasanbegovic started with some ideas he had already expressed in CNA’s report: *Four Views: How I Found Myself in War, How to Reach Sustainable Peace*. Translation of Special Articles published in *Vreme*, No. 600, 4 July 2002. The first passage has been inserted from this text.


This is just one part of that process. We should deal with the causes of violence in our society which existed at the beginning of the 1990s and still exist now. We have to recognise and analyse the sources of interethnic conflict in our societies. It is not just a matter of nationalist political parties. It is easy to say, nationalistic parties are responsible for all that happened, and Milosevic, Tudjman and Izetbegovic are guilty of everything. But it is not so simple. I think that there are deeper roots of our conflicts and the majority of people is still not aware of this. They were not aware in the beginning of the 1990s and they aren't aware of these roots now. We all have to deal with prejudices, with discrimination, with our tradition, with the role of our religious communities, with the role of the media. Without that I cannot imagine any way towards a good future. We are balancing on a very thin line now between the present and further wars and violent conflict in the future. I think many people really would prefer the other way, but it will not be easy to find unless we deal with the past.

418

There are many ghosts from the past we have to face. This is especially visible in Bosnia and in Serbia now. One month ago that videotape appeared in the Milosevic trial at the Tribunal in The Hague, which shows the execution of six young men from Srebrenica by one of the paramilitary troops from Serbia. The reaction was intense because of the cruelty of that tape but also because people watched something with their own eyes. I think it is a big difference if people only talk about things that happened or if they see it. People were completely amazed and shocked by this video, and this had a huge impact. People in Serbia had to recognise that Serbians have been responsible for this and it was not the responsibility of Bosnian Serbs. Up to then all the guilt had been shifted to the Bosnian Serbs and the role of the regime in Serbia was ignored by the population there. They just said that the war in Bosnia was an internal civil war, which had nothing to do with Serbia. There was a very intense reaction when this video was broadcast by TV stations all over the region. At that moment it became obvious that the people of Serbia played an important role in the Bosnian war.

So this video has questioned and changed the view of some people on the “truth”?

Tamara Smidling: I think after that video has been published it is no longer possible for many people in Serbia to deny that something incredibly ugly happened in Srebrenica. Now it is obvious. The question of collective responsibility appeared suddenly. I think that many people shared the feeling: “We are responsible for what happened in 1995 in Bosnia, and we are also responsible for what happened after that: we denied what happened, and pushed it aside.” Many people were genuinely affected by this.



Nedžad Horozovic: I agree with Tamara's analysis. For a long time, in our societies "Dealing with the Past" has been reduced to the Hague Tribunal. But this is not the entire picture. For me, facing the past is not just dealing with war crimes. We are in a contradictory and paradoxical situation: a majority of people do not want war and suffer from frustration and a lot of painful images concerning the war. But at the same time a majority of people still are potential actors in further wars. Because people are unaware of the causes. A lot of things like prejudices, hate speech in the media, the perception of victimisation and so on all contribute to sources of violence and sources for the next wars. For me, "Dealing with the Past" is the only way out of this vicious circle.

Did something change during the last ten years in Bosnia and the post-Yugoslav countries? Is the time ripe now for confrontation with the past?

Nedžad Horozovic: This videotape was very important as people from all sides in this region were faced with the dimension and cruelties of war crimes. I see that there is some progress: ten years ago the majority of people in Serbia were not ready to admit that in Srebrenica a war crime happened. After the video things are changing. Now we have a situation where people have realised that several thousands were killed in Srebrenica.

Tamara Smidling: I think that many things changed during the last ten years. It is really a long-term process. Maybe now, in 2005, it was the right moment to take this video to the public. But change did not only happen because of this recent film. Also before that we had presentations of documentary movies about Srebrenica and a lot of public discussions, even in the Parliament. So there is not just one thing which contributed to the changes in the public discourse. Of course, one important reason is also the pressure from the international community, which forced our politicians to discuss war crimes, and some TV stations presented material.

But my personal fear is that so far in Serbia the discussion has only focused on Srebrenica. Now Srebrenica has become some sort of paradigm for war in Bosnia. This is understandable, but I am afraid of a situation where people assume that the war crimes in Srebrenica are somehow separate from the whole structure, an exceptional single event rather than linked with the structure of violence and other incidents happening during the war in Bosnia and Croatia. It was very closely related to the situation in Serbia. Srebrenica was a terrible crime, but only one of many other crimes. If we focus our attention only on Srebrenica without some deep questioning of our responsibility and relation to that war, we will have only a two-dimensional picture of it. And I am speaking now from a position of a citizen of Serbia. I do not want that simplified picture

of war in Bosnia where everybody committed war crimes and maybe Srebrenica was the worst. I want to speak about Srebrenica, but I also want to discuss other important issues.

What other approaches are needed?

Adnan Hasanbegovic: I think we are still in a period where all sides see themselves as victims of the war. At present, we have a process of dealing with the facts of the war, the war crimes and ideologies. I see a need to develop empathy with the victims on all sides. Society can deal with it. On the one side there is the justice dimension, to put on trial people who are responsible directly for crimes. On the other hand there is collective and individual responsibility in society. In Bosnia it is important that people are faced with the consequences of violence and their attitudes and identity according to the war. What was their motivation to share ideology and to take sides? What violence has been committed in their names? It is necessary to try to develop empathy for the victims and to jump out of this role of the victim. It is necessary to see all the victims, not to see just one side as a victim. So that people really are able to understand the prejudices and to find common ground. Until now we have a totally polarised society; everybody only ever speaks about “their own” victims. If other sides start to talk about victims, people say: “Yes, but we also had victims...”

420

So everybody talks about victims, but nobody talks about perpetrators?

Tamara Smidling: Yes, this is the current situation. We are trying to encourage people to talk more about perpetrators, and to ask: “Who supports violence today, and who is responsible for the discrimination which has taken place since the war?”

Do you start at the very same level of discussion in order to change the type of discourse as the next step?

Tamara Smidling: I think we are trying to do something different, not to deal with these petrified categories of victims and perpetrators. We try to reflect on this from a different perspective. We say, ok, there are victims on all sides, on the Bosniak, Serb and Croat side, and there are perpetrators on each side. But we also do not want to spread the message: “We are all responsible and so everything is ok.” I think we have chosen the hardest way as we try to invite and provoke people to really see their own social responsibility for everything that happened before, during and after the war in our society.

We do not admit this categorisation, of addressing people as victims and perpetrators. We say: “Ok, I will respect your pain, if you perceive yourself as a

victim or as a person who has experienced a material, psychological, physical or cultural loss. I want to respect that but I do not want to support this and contribute to the petrification of your self-image as a victim.” At this stage in our society we must find a way to overcome this. We have to look at the people in Bosnia as survivors rather than victims. And they should also look at their responsibility for the past, present and future. I would like to see a holistic approach for “Dealing with the Past”. Of course, our approach cannot cover all these needs; no single organisation can do this alone. We want to deal with that issue of responsibility through the work with ex-combatants. Other organisations will deal with trauma healing, and others with justice (trials) or collecting stories, and documentation of the war. I see CNA as one part of a wide range of approaches searching for a common approach to “Dealing with the Past”.

Nedžad Horozovic: I see the need for our society to establish some kind of principles for when we talk about victims or perpetrators and what choice people had in the war. We need a discussion process which leads us to accept that there are victims on all sides. I want people to share a certain level of values. I want to contribute to ensuring that people judge from the same level of values when they look at people who committed war crimes or have forced others to be refugees in different places. If I blame someone from the other side for committing war crimes, I also have to recognise that war crimes have been committed by people in my own society. If I say: “This is a victim”, I have to recognise the same for people from other sides. To make people aware of this is the approach of our project “Dealing with the Past”.

421

Several civil society actors in Bosnia have proposed establishing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Would that be a helpful contribution to sensitise the societies in the region to “Dealing with the Past”?

Adnan Hasanbegovic: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission still does not exist. Some people have tried to establish something like that but there is no consensus about this in Bosnia, neither in society nor among the political parties. I think that the people who are involved in this initiative did not have the necessary credibility in all parts of Bosnian society. To me, it seems that this initiative was designed pretty much “from the top”, especially as there was pressure from the internationals. People did not recognise the commission as something they could trust. In my perception, this was an important reason why these efforts have not been successful. Moreover, a lot of obstacles still exist on the political level: there are still some [entrenched] centres of power and people who do not have much interest in adopting new approaches.

In general, I think that a TRC would be a good idea, under certain

conditions. It should guarantee that it deals with the past in the way we suggested before. But as long as there is no political consensus on the question: “Do we need to deal with the past at all?” and “How shall we deal with it?”, any Truth and Reconciliation Commission would definitely fail. For the time being, victims’ organisations, for instance, have a strong wish to find war criminals and bring them to justice, this is their priority. But political organisations see a certain danger arising from this approach. Many people are still very afraid to talk openly; they feel a real danger. A lot of individuals and groups are still not ready to move in this direction because of pressure from society in their environment. This is really a very complex problem. To establish something like a TRC on the political level at least will need a lot of time. Maybe we could think about that at a later stage.

Does that mean that Bosnian society is still not ready for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

Adnan Hasanbegovic: No, it is definitely not ready for this.

Sanja Deankovic: If there is no consensus, it cannot work. My fear is that the people who are involved in a Truth and Reconciliation Commission will have totally different priorities. In my opinion, for the time being we can only talk about facts, and we have to be aware that a lot of people claim their right to have their own truth and we all need to accept that another truth and opinion exists. I do not think that a TRC is a bad idea in general but I wonder if it matches the reality in Bosnia. Maybe we need something totally different, even if we just don’t know what it is. I think that in Bosnia we still spend lots of energy on things which are not so important to start the process of facing the past.

Nedžad Horozovic: In my opinion, any further incentives for a TRC or similar initiatives have to be designed on this regional level; this is a very important precondition. So the regional level is really important. The Hague Tribunal also had to start its work on the regional level, collecting testimonies, which was very important. On a national level in Bosnia-Herzegovina, it cannot work. In Bosnia, for example, a “Commission for Srebrenica” has been established. The expectation of why this Commission is needed was manifold and even contradictory in Bosnian society. Some said: “The Serbs have to admit that the Srebrenica massacre happened.” Others (the Bosnian Serbs) said: “Well, we have to say something about Srebrenica.” All this happened under pressure from the High Representative. And after that initiative was established, an initiative for a commission for Serb victims in Sarajevo was started. So you can see that all this follows some kind of “ping pong” procedure. There is no clear picture in society why we need this kind of work. Many people still expect that they will get clear documentation on “this is the victim” and “this is the perpetrator”. But

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this does not lead to a constructive peace process and will not mean progress for constructing a future society in Bosnia.

Tamara Smidling: I do think that society in Bosnia in principle is ready for a TRC and in some way this society really needs such a thing. And I guess that it would not be that difficult to gather valid people from both the Federation and Republika Srpska (RS) who would be ready to work together on these topics in a serious manner. But I am not sure that the people who have promoted the initiative for a TRC in Bosnia so far really know what they should do with such a commission. To me, it seems that all this follows a certain blueprint applied by the international community in post-conflict regions: first, there is food and health care and then let's start with story-telling about the war and documentation, let's bring people to trials in different national or international courts, and then let's also establish a TRC. I think that some intellectuals here in our society want to apply this pattern also in Bosnia, but without really understanding what would be the benefit of it and what exactly we should do with it.

There are different organisations in Serbia and Bosnia already working very effectively in that field: They do documentation, they do collect testimonies and memories, so I am asking myself: "What would be the added value of a TRC? For whom will it work? What kind of job will it do? Who will actually be capable of dealing with that difficult job?" The crucial question for me is: "Who will get access to military documentation?" I think we urgently need that, but I am not sure that the civil society actors who promote the TRC in Bosnia will be the ones who will have access to the military and police archives. But if this access is not guaranteed, we do not need an additional commission. It does not make sense simply to follow a pattern and say: South Africa had a TRC, and Sierra Leone had a TRC, and eastern Germany ... and so we also need a TRC. We should ask ourselves: why do we need it, which purposes and aims should it follow and what exactly is its mandate? I would like to see one institution that really would gather people from different "ethnic" groups who are ready to work together, and that has access to all the necessary sources.

Sanja Deankovic: I agree, a lot of things have already been done in Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia, but those things are still not so visible. We are connected with people who are collecting stories, who are working on trauma, peace education and so on. So I know that a lot of things are done. But if I ask ordinary people about what is happening in the process of "Dealing with the Past", many people will say: "Nothing has happened so far". Many people are not aware of what is done on the grassroots level. It is a challenge to develop more initiatives for connecting those things which are already happening. This could be the start for people to find out more about sources that could be used for working on the past.

Do you think that the initiatives on the ground level of society will lead to a change in politics on the higher level?


Sanja Deankovic: I think people working on the ground level do important things but they are still not adequately connected. Exchange of information is one possible way to put it on a broader base. Things must be linked much more on the regional level, including all parts of former Yugoslavia, because over here, everything, the past, present and future, is totally connected.

Tamara Smidling: I think that grassroots initiatives can change politics somehow and we have contributed to change. Not CNA alone, but together with many other initiatives. But I also think that we have a lack of general insight in our society and we need some sort of evaluation after ten years of peace work and different efforts of “Dealing with the Past”. We should really ask ourselves: what kind of changes can we identify on the general level of society? What is our specific contribution to this? It is hard to measure that, to measure the level of discrimination and the level of respect for human rights. I think CNA’s work has changed something. I really see that some things changed in our environment but it is difficult for me to say what exactly is CNA’s contribution and also in general, how peace work on the ground level has influenced the overall situation.

What kinds of change in society have been influenced, in your view?

Tamara Smidling: Three or five years ago it would have been impossible to expect politicians from the RS and Serbia to say anything about war crimes and their own responsibility for them. Bosnian Serbs and Serbs would always have repeated their opinion that this war was a civil war and they had to defend their homes and towns and people. But today we have a completely different situation. Now it is really impossible for any politician from the RS to defend the criminal actions of the army of RS in Srebrenica, Visegrad or Foca. No serious politician in the RS today will be able to simply state: “This was war, and in war such things are normal”, as they used to do before. Also in Serbia it is not possible any more for serious politicians (except the Radical Party) to deny the role of the Serbian army in the Bosnian war and in Croatia, because it became obvious that Serbia played a most important role in this. They finally had to admit that it was not Serbs from Bosnia but people from Serbia and the government in Belgrade who were in charge of those wars. Now it is no longer the issue for them to deny this but now the question is how to navigate all this and to say: “Ok, we were responsible, but we are not as responsible as you want us to be.”

I am not happy with that, but at least it is a step forward. At least on this basis it is not so easy to dehumanise the people from the other side any longer. It



is no longer possible to say in a public sphere, as it was before: “Ok, maybe we killed several thousand Albanians, but who cares, they are Albanians.” Of course, we do not know what is going on in people’s minds and in their private thinking. But at least on the political level and in public life it is not possible anymore to argue like this.

One of CNA’s trademarks is the regional approach. You involve people from different regions of the former Yugoslavia. Moreover, you strive to overcome the dichotomy of “victim” and “perpetrator”, which is still a taboo for many people. Another innovative approach is to involve war veterans. This group illustrates very well that people cannot easily be categorised. They often appear to be both victims and perpetrators at the same time. Some of them participated voluntarily, but others were called to service and have been forced to act as soldiers against their will in the recent wars. Many of them suffer from traumas, like the rest of society. What motivated the ex-soldiers to join your work?

Adnan Hasanbegovic: They have experience with violence and war and they want to help ensure that this will not happen again. They want to talk about it because they need to express their feelings and talk about what they went through. Speaking for myself as an ex-combatant, I can say I wanted to talk about it because I wanted to offer people to listen to my testimony so that they can either recognise themselves in it or learn from it. Speaking about what happened at the frontlines is very hard and emotional, but it also illustrates war and makes people aware that this is something very bad. This process can help ex-soldiers to re-socialise. Many of them are marginalised by society, others are being manipulated by the politicians who treat them as heroes. They are often reactive, not pro-active. They are just trying to maintain a good relation with the government in order to ensure that they get social support. So there is a need for them to talk openly in order to become more pro-active. They see also a need to talk to the people from the “other side”. Facing the ex-enemies can also help deal with trauma. Of course, everyone has different motives, but I think a main motivation is that they want to be an accepted member of society.

Nedžad Horozovic: I think there are different individual motives for ex-combatants to join our approach. It is often not so clear-cut for people in the beginning when they start to work with us. But this changes during the process. My impression is that ex-combatants all feel great frustration about the war and the post-war period, as society very often directly or indirectly blames them as “those who are guilty for the war”. It is very difficult for many ex-combatants to deal with this, and this is also an important issue which drives them to speak. An important motive for joining our work is that they can talk about their

experiences; they can express personal feelings and explain how they got into the war and how they felt about this, without being judged as a member of a group.

And what was CNA's motivation to approach this target group?

Nedžad Horozovic: We approached the war veterans because we think they have huge credibility in this society when they talk about war, as many people here still see them as heroes. And they really can offer something important to peacebuilding.

You approached them by contacting veterans' associations. In many post-war regions veterans' unions are considered to be "spoilers" rather than promoters of peace processes. What is your experience with these organisations in Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia?


Adnan Hasanbegovic: War veteran unions are mostly obstacles to peace processes as they are very often under the influence of the political parties. Their primary motivation is certainly not peacebuilding. Their interest is mostly devoted to securing social support, pensions, etc. for their members. But there are a lot of individuals among their members who do recognise the importance of peacebuilding. Some of them were motivated to join us. The veterans' unions in Serbia, for instance, gave us at least formal support. But in Bosnia, the situation was completely different. None of them gave us support as an organisation, but some individuals did do so. I would say that veterans in general do not have a problem with our approach, but as an organisation they mostly do not have a consensus on how to deal with it. In some cases we also realised that after coming to our public panels, members of war veterans' unions started to lobby within their associations for our ideas, so these ideas are growing, and that's important. In general we can say that we have good cooperation with the war veterans' organisations.

426

But there were also cases of obstruction, for instance in Serbia...?

Adnan Hasanbegovic: In one town in Serbia, members of a veterans' union wanted to disturb and boycott the public panel. Police helped to ensure that the panel could take place. Then we invited these demonstrators to join the hearing and they participated in the audience. First, they tried to obstruct the discussion but then afterwards they approached the panel speakers, established contact and joined the discussion. So they finally proved to be very useful for this event.

Tamara Smidling: Yes, during the discussion process they changed their minds and they contributed important questions for the speakers. So it was a



good example which also showed us that we had chosen the right way to deal with it. But Adnan forgot to mention one experience in the panel which was held in Sarajevo. We had a serious problem there with the Green Berets. They have huge power in Sarajevo as a veterans' organisation of a special task force which fought during the war. We informed them about the project. Two days before the public forum they called us and declared that in their perception our approach is against the Bosniak people. They criticised that we would want to equalise victims (Bosniak people in their view) and perpetrators (Serbs and Croats in their view). Then they appeared at the public forum, not with the intention of listening but to disturb and obstruct it. This was their intention from the beginning right through to the end. So we had a serious problem and we had no blueprint to deal with it. It was not like other experiences when people expressed a different opinion. There was absolutely no way to discuss with them in order to find common ground. My impression of these people – before, during and after the forum – was that this association is totally opposed to our values. But we are not the only ones who had a problem with Green Berets.

Nedžad Horozovic: I would like to explain how we have tried to reduce problems and constructively involve potential spoilers in general. During the preparation of all the panels, we tried to establish relations with all veterans' unions in the towns, explaining to them very transparently what we wanted to do, why we were doing it this way, what was the focus of the stories and who would be participating in the forums. Usually after that we had no problems. In Sarajevo we did it the same way but we were not successful in the case of the Green Berets. I tried to explain our project to them in detail in a very long telephone call, but I did not feel that they would accept us. We already knew they would be against it but we decided not to give them a more important role than other organisations. But finally and unfortunately they played an important and destructive role. The event in Sarajevo was tough for two reasons: first, because we had no means of dealing with this obstruction, and second, because we observed that although 90% of the people who participated as audience were against these interventions by the Green Berets they did not do anything to stop them.

How do you know that people were against the obstruction by the Green Berets?

Nedžad Horozovic: We know that because at the beginning of the discussion someone said something positive about our panel speakers and all the audience applauded. But afterwards, when the members of the Green Berets started to speak and disrupt the event, nobody said anything to stop them. Instead, people stayed quiet, were looking around and most of them seemed to have a bad feeling about this. It seems that these Green Berets activists have

been successful in completely intimidating the audience. For me this was a major problem because it is symptomatic of the situation here and in Bosnian society. Most of the people and organisations in Sarajevo are against the politics of the Green Berets. But nobody stands up and says: “I do not agree with you.”

Looking back, do you think it would have been better to include those people as potential spoilers even more in the preparatory phase in order to make them accept the project?

Sanja Deankovic: No, I am sure any further invitation or contact would not have made any difference. These people are building their image by protesting against anything they think is against the Bosniak people. They understand themselves as defenders of the honour of the victims of Bosnia. They were also protesting against a concert of a rock group because the singer was of Bosniak origin but lived in Serbia during the war. They build up a strong identity based on this separation and this makes it difficult to approach them and make them listen to you ...

Tamara Smidling: ... and they regard themselves as “tough guys” ...

So they are real “hardliners” to the peace process?


Sanja Deankovic: Yes, but in a way they are very powerful hardliners as they still have a lot of money, they own private TV stations and have strong influence on the newspapers.

Adnan Hasanbegovic: I agree, but we have to be aware that this is only one particular group and there are a lot of other war veterans’ associations in Bosnia – for instance, at least ten of them in Sarajevo – and also in Serbia which have been much more open or even supportive.

It seems that the public panel in Sarajevo was less satisfactory for you, for many reasons, compared with the rest of the panel series. Did this experience contribute to your decision not to continue the panel series?

Tamara Smidling: No. We had decided much earlier that the three public forums in Bosnia would be the last forums we would organise for the moment. This was already decided before we started the panel series in Bosnia. The reason for this is simply that we did not want to be “the organisation who organises public forums with ex-combatants”; we did not want to become a kind of “travelling circus” which goes from town to town, repeating that pattern. So we decided that we would stop after that series.

But regarding the last panel in Sarajevo I want to add my views on this as well: we all wanted to do something in Sarajevo as well because this is the



town where we worked since 1997. Of course we knew that we are still pretty invisible in the local community and only few people know us, and that was also a reason to decide: “Let’s finally try a public forum in Sarajevo as well and talk about the war stories and our personal stories.” I still think in a way it was a good forum because we stressed some important elements of “Dealing with the Past” that we wanted to affirm, like this question of justice and forgiveness and empathy with people from the other side. So it was really a complex picture. But nevertheless we were very frustrated by this experience. I must admit that I expected something different from this public forum. In the end I had to realise that there is much more space to work on these issues in small semi-urban places like Nevisinje or Gornij Vakuf than in the capital of Bosnia. I still am a bit frustrated by this experience but this did not lead me to question our approach; the contrary was the case, because after this I felt even more convinced of it.

Nedžad Horozovic: It is important to say: maybe we were not so satisfied and successful with that forum, but still I was fine with this because I know that we did not do any damage or anything counterproductive.

Sanja Deankovic: Something which struck me in the Sarajevo forum was that not a single journalist showed up to our press conference. Normally when we organised these events and presented them there were at least some journalists. But at the Sarajevo press conference there was nobody at all. Probably there are lots of reasons for that. Maybe people think that they know everything already, or they set other priorities. But this was really frustrating for me.

429

Is society in Sarajevo less prepared for peace work?

Sanja Deankovic: I do not think it is less prepared, but it is certainly much more difficult here to work and to reach people.

Tamara Smidling: After that public forum I asked myself why it is so difficult to work for peacebuilding in Sarajevo. I became aware that the whole town of Sarajevo is very deeply immersed in the role of “victim” – we talked a lot about that process of “victimisation” – and Sarajevo was and still is a symbol for this and this is really a serious obstacle. The room for manoeuvre for peace-related work – like our public forums – is pretty narrow here, because people here feel like they “already know everything about war”. It is hard for them to hear something new. Everything seems to be clear and well-known.

Around 16 veterans presented their views on the war at the panels and joined your work – will some of them go on with peace work or even organise further panels?

Tamara Smidling: I know that some colleagues from Croatia were very interested in organising similar events in Croatia. Some have had that in mind for

years. We would support any such initiatives from Croatia, but we will not take the initiative. For the veterans from Bosnia, I am not sure that they will continue to organise public forums. Most of them do not have strong support from any organisations and still work very much as individuals. If they decide to do it we would certainly encourage and support them. Our problem is that many people in Bosnia still regard us, CNA, very much as a potential source of initiative and new ideas. Many people are ready to support us and would do all they could do. But I am still waiting for people to take their own initiative.

CNA will probably go on to deal with issues related to “Dealing with the Past”. But you have shifted priorities from training now towards film-making and book production, in order to address a wider public. You have already produced a film named “Traces”, directed by Nenad Vukosavljevic. What is the subject of this film? Is it used as material for peace work?

Nedžad Horozovic: This is a documentary film made for TV. Ex-soldiers present their views on the war and their individual experiences. Participants in our training courses and multipliers who already belong to our network have already seen it and use it for peace education, and so do our partners abroad. By the end of this year the film will be presented to the public in Sarajevo, Belgrade and Zagreb. We also sent it to several film festivals, with the purpose of receiving some award or review which could help us to distribute it to TV stations.

Apart from this you have planned other documentary films. What are these films about?

Nedžad Horozovic: Currently we are working on two films. They deal with similar issues but tell a different story. We try to give some incentives to establish dialogue first between Bosniak and Serb people and second between Serb and Croat people. Both films create space for people to ask questions and these will be answered by people from the “other side”. There are people involved in these films who never met each other. We try to find “ordinary” people, not representatives of politics or the media and so on, just people who do have questions for people of the other side about the war and the post-war period and are ready to answer questions. It is about talking about prejudices, stereotypes and also painful experiences.

Do these people meet each other later during the project?

We try to establish communication between ethnic groups at a personal level with this movie but the participants do not meet during the project. It is a simulation of dialogue. But it is possible that some of them will meet after the film is finished.



How do you find the people who are ready to talk and to participate?

Tamara Smidling: Some of the participants in our training programmes and also ex-combatants have been involved in this. They helped us and worked hard to identify local partners and interested people in their communities in different parts of Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia. We collected questions from these people and recorded and taped all these questions. Then we – or our partners – ask the questions and people answer in front of the camera.

So this is much more than a film project for education purposes. It is an entire dialogue project in which CNA functions as facilitator. Do the same people participate in the book project you have planned?

Sanja Deankovic: The book project is different. It is meant to illuminate what people in the region think about “reconciliation”. The concept differs from the film as we try to include not only people from Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia but also from Macedonia and Albania. There is no simultaneous dialogue. We are the ones who put the questions for the interviewees, questions like: “Do we need reconciliation? Why do we need this? Which fears exist in your community that prevent people from facing the past?” We want to collect the views of ordinary people on these topics because we want to give space to the voices of people who usually are not heard so much. We collect thoughts from people of different ages, genders and education. We developed the questionnaire together with our partners and they help us by conducting these interviews in their communities.

431

Is “reconciliation” a popular concept in the region of former Yugoslavia?

Sanja Deankovic: I realised that this term is much more in use here in Bosnia. In Croatia it is not really seen as necessary. People do not see any real need to reconcile, and ask themselves with whom they should reconcile. In the big cities, or at the coast, there is a widespread feeling that: “We are living very well, now we live in our own country, we are living in a nice society, we have got economic problems but it will get better some day, war is over, everything is ok, summer is beginning and we have beach parties ...” But only 80 kilometres away from this, when you come to the regions where war took place, the situation is completely different. People there want to speak about all these issues but they do not know how to go about it.

And what about society in Bosnia? Is there a wish for “reconciliation” today, ten years after the war?


In Bosnia you can hear people talking about “reconciliation” every day in the media news. But we do not have much feedback on how people understand

this and what they mean by this term. We do not want to discuss the definition of the term with people. But we want to hear about what they feel and how they understand this word and what it means in their everyday life. This is what we want to focus on in our book project. We want to find out what is common understanding and what is different. Some people see the need for others to apologise for things they have done, others see “reconciliation” as a process, some see a need for this on the individual level, and others on the collective level.

So there seems to be a general acceptance of the concept. Did you ever hear any criticism of the concept or people arguing that reconciliation is an idea based on Christian values?

Tamara Smidling: I heard this criticism especially from people from Indonesia and the Philippines and other regions whom I met in a training programme in the US. Some argued that “reconciliation” is a Christian concept which is imposed by the international community. I never heard this argument in Bosnia. But – to be honest – we also have to admit that those who talk about “reconciliation” in our region are mostly the NGO community and people working in projects which are usually supported from abroad. I have never heard ordinary people say: “We need reconciliation.” I have often heard people say: “We need a healing process in our society” and “We need to re-establish our value system”, or that it is necessary to re-construct connections between people, that there is a need for trust-building and story-telling. Maybe the content is similar, but usually people do not use the term “reconciliation”. I really doubt that “reconciliation” is a very well-known and widespread concept in Bosnia.

I heard that some people have a problem with the term “reconciliation” because they perceive it as a concept that expects everyone to sit together and shake hands and forget about the past atrocities, and shift responsibility for the crimes to the nationalist parties in the sense of: “Let’s go to our bright and shiny future and everything will be ok.” Some people have that perception and might therefore be reluctant to follow this concept. They fear that it will support the tendency to deny individual responsibility for what happened. But intellectuals and NGOs in Bosnia talk a lot about “reconciliation”. I think that many people who use the term do not know exactly what they mean by this. The debate on “reconciliation” is dominated by a few influential groups in the context of UNDP and OSCE and international and local NGOs. This discourse is good for our society, and at the same time it is bad because it is disconnected from ordinary people. I think this is why especially in Bosnia we all need a discussion about “reconciliation” and we need to connect it with talking about individual roles and



responsibilities. That's why we decided to collect and edit different perceptions of "reconciliation" to find out what it means for different people in Bosnia and also in different regions of former Yugoslavia. We want to carry out a critical review of the concept and initiate discussion about how to deal with the past and how to design the future. Also within peace work there is no consensus: for some of us "reconciliation" is a process, for others, it is a result of a process. Our basic intention is to illuminate that plurality. But we are not going to talk about abstract categories. We want to talk about concrete needs in our societies.

Adnan Hasanbegovic: Many people do not use the term, but many others are already involved in the process and practice of "reconciliation"; they already have experience of connecting or interacting with ex-enemies on the individual and political level. But there are still very different views on what are the necessary preconditions and priorities for that process. Many people would say, for instance, that improving the economic conditions in this country would do much to initiate a process of reconciliation, which means that economic progress and social justice are seen as first priority. But in my opinion this concept remains very much on the surface. I don't think that if we establish social justice we will all reconcile. But it is important for us to get a clearer picture of what people see as necessary preconditions for further development of society, how this is linked with traditions, and how this can lead to a broader discussion.

433

Are there also different views and perceptions of reconciliation in the CNA team?

Tamara Smidling: We do have different perceptions and opinions but we have consensus about priorities. We all agree that we need a regional approach to discuss all these issues and that we need to explore at a deep level the causes of wars and violence. I think the question of personal and collective responsibility has priority and we want to work on this issue. We want to ask people in Bosnia, for instance Bosnian Serbs who lived here before the war and who supported the idea that "all Serbs should live in one state", what does this mean practically: "Are you responsible now?" and if you say: "I believed in that idea but I did not want the war", what does it mean?

Many people did not want the war but they were ready to fight for some political ideas without being conscious of the consequences of these ideas. Talking about this is important to get closer to the roots of discrimination and structural violence based on cultural, religious or ethnic differences in our society. We all have to ask ourselves how we supported or contributed to these structures and we have to make people aware.

Adnan Hasanbegovic: Our approach to conflict transformation has focused both on the concept of dialogue and on the question of reconciliation

from the very beginning. We are working *on the conflict* and *on the relation between conflict and violence*. We are still not sure if reconciliation is a result or a process, and we have to go deeper to understand this context. For me, reconciliation is still more connected with the individual level; talking about collective reconciliation seems very abstract to me. Can anybody reconcile with social groups? I can decide if I am ready to forgive, but it is very hard for me to imagine to do that on a collective level.

Nedžad Horozovic: For me, one of the basic things in the process of peacebuilding is self-critical understanding and questioning of everything, including the term and concept of “reconciliation”. Readiness for self-critical questioning of your own responsibility is one of the most important preconditions for “reconciliation” both on the individual and on the collective level. It is important to open some space to discuss what has to be part of this process. What do people from Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia, Croatia and Macedonia think is needed? This is also what we try to do in our training in nonviolent action.

It seems to be a major challenge to link all these different regional contexts of wars and violence in your training – how do you create space for this?

Sometimes it is possible to open that space and discuss different scenarios in order to approach the question of “reconciliation”. But sometimes it is not possible. For people who come to our basic training, it is usually too hard and too much for them. And especially when people are too young it is not possible. We can do that only in the “advanced training” and in the “training for trainers”. In the training for ex-combatants it was different. These were very special. They did not want to waste their time on communication skills and anything like that, they really wanted to get straight to the heart of the question: “Let’s talk about war and let’s talk about our responsibility.”

434

Is it easier to address the past working with older people than with younger people?

Tamara Smidling: Yes, with people who were at least 15, 16 or 17 years old at the beginning of the war, it is definitely easier. With people who are much younger or were born during or after the war, it is very hard to push this approach. They often say: “I can’t recognise my responsibility. I wasn’t around at that time.” Very often we discover that they know almost nothing about the war. For example, people from Serbia who are 20 years old now have never had a chance to meet with people from Bosnia or Croatia. So they do not have any information about what is going on in these countries and they have no idea about the consequences of the war over there. They just know that there was war,

but not much more. So it is very hard to work with these people.

Adnan Hasanbegovic: I share this view. People who have been involved in war at least know what they are talking about. Younger people just do not see any need for reconciliation; they do not have any clear picture of what this means at all. Also in Bosnia, many young people communicate easily with other groups. They do not have such problems with prejudices. But many of them have the feeling that some time ago some old nationalistic guys started some wars. In our last “advanced training”, for instance, we really had a problem to address issues concerning the past. We observed that many young people also feel a certain pressure to talk about this. I therefore think there is a general tendency to avoid these topics. They do not see it as a major issue for them and want to go on to the future. We really have to rethink the strategies, also in our training work, in order to reach these younger people.

Tamara Smidling: I think it is really important that we keep on working on that issue of “Dealing with the Past”, also with younger people. But we have to find the right approach for this and try to confront them less directly with these topics. We have to give them topics which are easier to talk about for them and then afterwards we can try to open those big boxes like the issue of “reconciliation”.

Sanja Deankovic: The reality here, 10 years after the war, is that young people in all countries of the region have grown up in a kind of monoculture. In school, they learn completely different concepts of history, and they are learning about literature and writers who are supposed to be representatives of a special Croat, Serb or Bosniak culture. These young people have hardly any chance to meet people from the neighbouring countries. What I experienced, for instance, in Croatia is that in recent years there has been a trend of totally denying that we had any connection with Serbs in our past. And young people who did not live in the former Yugoslavia, especially those who do not live in former war areas, simply do not have any feeling and understanding that we could have something in common. These people regard any meeting with people of other nationalities from former Yugoslavia as something mystic or esoteric. For some people from Croatia or Bosnia it is the first time in their life when they come to our training and meet Serbs from Serbia, for example. So it is not surprising that they do not see the need to think about those painful things, but it is still a problem.


What do you regard as the most successful example of CNA’s work and what is the most frustrating experience of failure? Which are challenges for your future work?

Adnan Hasanbegovic: For me the most important success was that we were able to build up a growing network of people who passed through our programme and that we could involve so many people who would join our

approach and have been empowered to continue our work as multipliers and initiators of further peacebuilding projects in the region. For me, this showed that we have introduced a very good model of peace education for this area. It gave people the opportunity to talk about different things, to learn skills and methods of nonviolence and also to learn to identify the needs in their local communities, what should be done in their specific context in the process of peacebuilding. Another element of our work which I regard as a success is that we could open the taboos of “Dealing with the Past” and really work with ex-combatants on this. I think we were one of the first who started to do these things, talking very directly about war and about war crimes with people who are connected with the army. And we managed to grab a public space, and got broad media coverage for this both in Bosnia and Serbia. So we discovered that even if it is difficult there is some space for spreading our message. We opened space and also provided an incentive for discussion. We encouraged and motivated people who have seen that it is possible to do such a thing. I think in all communities where we organised panels, people were afraid to touch these questions before we started, and afterwards they saw that it was possible.

Concerning the *frustration and failures*: of course I felt lots of frustration during some workshops. Some public panels were exhausting and very emotional, also for us. Sometimes we were confronted with hate speech, nationalist opinions and negative feelings from the audience. Another difficulty is also to maintain the same level of energy and continue working on this very hard stuff over a longer period.

Challenges for the future: We need visions, new models of encouraging ourselves and also of encouraging other people, especially our partners, to continue working in the long run. We go very deep on some tough topics. “Dealing with the Past” and dealing with war and violence always is a painful process and very hard for many people to deal with. So we have to find a good balance and avoid creating feelings of depression. We need to find ways for encouraging people to deal with this even if it causes pain. It is very easy to work on peacebuilding on the surface. But if you go deeper into those questions of “Dealing with the Past”, structural violence and prejudices, people may come out with lots of personal dilemmas they find it difficult to cope with. Sometimes people also get lost and overwhelmed by the challenge of transforming all these conflicts which are so deeply rooted in our culture. We have to find ways to encourage people and give them skills to deal with these issues on the personal level and also on the pedagogical level in their different contexts and realities. Another challenge is to broaden the audience for these issues and address a wider public, which we intend to do by making documentary films and the book project.



Nedžad Horozovic: I see a challenge for us to maintain the work we have done so far, but we have to extend it to other fields. I am afraid that after all the people who are accused of war crimes are finally tried in The Hague and put into prison, the mainstream of our society will not discuss any more. 20 or 30 people will be in jail and some people in our society will have the feeling that there is no more need for discussion and we should bury the past. Many important things which are necessary preconditions for a peacebuilding process will probably be buried as well. And this will create the potential for future outbreaks of violence or even wars.

Some people in the region say: we first have to deal with the past in order to design the future – others say: no, we have to talk about the future first and look at the past from the perspective of the future. Is this a contradiction?

Adnan Hasanbegovic: It is important to see that people here are full of stories of the war; the public space is full of this now. So there is also a risk that people will get fed up with it. But this is not a constructive process, as most of them have not dealt really deeply with these questions so far. But anyway, we have to find other models to approach people without risking stretching them too far. We have to ask: “What is the adequate level for people, according to their experience and education?” One of the purposes we had when we planned the book project on reconciliation is that the interviews will also give us new insights and help us to know what people think and what their concerns are so that we can address these concerns more effectively and adapt our peace education approaches to those different realities.

The most important challenge for me is how to address the young people in order to motivate them to take responsibility for the future. What is happening now is that a new generation is emerging which has no direct relation with the war. This is a chance but also a risk. They can only build a peaceful future if they take responsibility for the present, which is still affected by the past. I am afraid that the current trend is not that people say: “We are a new generation and so we are going to make a better society ...” Instead many problems are swept under the carpet again. Of course it is important to talk about the future. But I think we are still in a post-war period and we still have not entered a stage where our societies constructively deal with the past, without sweeping things under the carpet. I hope that we can enter a period where people are encouraged to come out with these things and become active in this field.

This interview with the staff of the Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA) was undertaken on 7 July 2005 in Sarajevo.

Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA):

Challenges for Sustainable Peacebuilding

Documentation: Statement by CNA

When we say *sustainable* peace we think of a society where social justice exists, where there is no discrimination or hate speech of any kind, and even if they exist, they are not generally accepted by society. We are talking about a society where every individual has a feeling of belonging, acceptance and security and has a right to their own identity. There is no such peace in this region. We cannot expect anyone from outside to “bring” it to us or expect ruling structures to “impose” it. It should be build from *underneath*, by citizens who are aware of their responsibility for the society they live in and who have chosen to take action against injustice and discrimination, together with authorities and institutions.

1) Overcoming “Victimisation” of Societies

438

One of the major obstacles in building sustainable peace in the societies of former Yugoslavia is the overall *victimisation* of these societies. The victimisation is multiple and it exists on three different levels: people feel like victims of “the others” with whom they were once at war (the others are often blamed not only for the war, but for all the consequences of the war too: difficult economic situation, many refugees and displaced persons, ruined economy, increased crime and violence rates, etc.). Then there is the feeling of being a victim, of helplessness and dependence on “one’s own” politicians (one can often hear the following: “What can we do about it, we know who’s deciding our fate”) and also on world powers (“We are just guinea pigs in their experiments”). The role of the victim is one of the *most comfortable ones*, because it frees us from any kind of responsibility whatsoever: for our own destiny (because all of the levels stated above affect us), but also for the society we live in (because “we know who’s deciding our fate”). It is clear there will be no substantial change in this region as long as we stay buried in the role of the victim.

2) Taking Responsibility for the Past

Opening the discussion about responsibility for the war and all the things that were happening to us and all around us initiates the resistance towards dealing with responsibility. Even when there is an awareness that we all share responsibility, a question comes up: *Why must we start first* with the process of re-examining of responsibility for the past? “We Serbs” or “we Croats” or “we Bosniaks”... Having this kind of attitude means that we should be ashamed if we “started first” with this

process, instead of being proud of it (although it's difficult to determine who started first, because different groups and individuals have been working on it in this region for quite some time already). By dealing with our own responsibility for the past, we offer a hand and make space for the path to reconciliation, thus supporting others to start that process too.

If there's awareness that "our side" or "someone in our name" committed war crimes, they are easily justified by saying: "But the others did it, too". We find it very important for the peacebuilding process to deal with war crimes committed "in our name". Yes, *the others* committed them too, but that's not an excuse. Let's see first what's in our own backyard and then criticise the neighbour's.

Giving people a chance to hear what it is like for the *others* – Croats, Bosniaks, Albanians, Serbs ("*them*") – what their problems are, their fears and hopes, is a very important step towards mutual understanding and thereby towards peacebuilding. These stories are often very much alike, they tell mostly of hardship and are very human. They inevitably initiate compassion and feelings of solidarity, de-mystification and humanisation of *the enemy*. It also causes people to lose their prejudice that *the others are all the same, Chetniks, Ustasa, Balia*.

How, for example, does an Albanian feel in Belgrade, where prejudices against this ethnic group are very strong and one can often hear *they are* "savages", "dirty", "they breed (like rabbits)", and their ultimate goal is a Great Albania? How do Croats and Serbs feel in Sarajevo if they can only find work with a few Croats or Serbs who run their own businesses? How do the few remaining Serbs or Gorani feel in Pristina, when they cannot speak their own language on the street for security reasons? How do Bosniaks in Banja Luka feel when they're not allowed to rebuild Ferhadija Mosque, which was destroyed by mines during the war? They all certainly share one feeling: a lack of security and limited freedom to express their own identity and prospects, something every human being needs.

Within such a framework, it is very important to have public debates on identities, especially national identities. What does it mean for a person to be a Serb, Bosniak, Albanian or Croat? What values does this bring? What prejudices and fears? We did *live together* once, or we lived next to each other, but we didn't really know each other. We were smothered with the idea of "brotherhood and unity". This said that we were all the same, and expressing one's ethnic or religious identity was either suppressed or was a *sign of bad taste*. Not knowing or quasi-knowing each other was something that created a fertile soil for the growth of many prejudices. People who have the need to live and express their ethnic identity are often stamped as nationalists. The missing element, in our opinion, is an affirmation of ethnic identities through values that they bring, values that are not based either on the *battles we once won* or on those things in which *others are worse than we are*. These values are based on *the*

wealth of cultures – which does not endanger or deprecate anyone. This is something we need to work on.

The different and the unknown are mostly perceived as a threat. It is followed by distancing, instead of getting to know the unknown, communicating and creating security through mutual cooperation and trust. The national – “country’s own” – army is often publicly presented as the security guarantee, while the neighbouring countries perceive it as a threat and respond with further armament. Spending funds from the small national budget on the army weakens the country’s economy, provokes social discontent, increases violence, and creates a fertile soil for extremism, thus increasing chances for the abuse of the army. The circle is closed. It’s a paradox that after all these wars, militarism is perceived as the way to provide security. Yet there is still a lack of alternatives to this widely accepted pattern. There is no magic formula, but the alternative way is undoubtedly communication and cooperation with the closest neighbours, which must be preceded by mutual trust-building.

3) Refusing to Accept Violence

In our opinion, important steps in the process of building sustainable peace include *sensitising people to violence and condemning violence* by society. By this, we mean an awareness that violence is not just physical or as direct as hitting somebody or throwing a bomb at an Albanian-owned store in a mostly Serb-populated village in Vojvodina. The threat of violence is itself violence; it is also discrimination, insult or contempt. Violence is when they correct your *Ekavica* dialect to *Ijekavica* dialect in a bakery in Sarajevo; or when an Albanian woman refuses to sell her tomatoes to a Macedonian woman at the market in Skopje. Violence is also when we feel unsafe in the towns and villages we live in.

In the very moment when all of us start to condemn violence, regardless of who the victim is and why, regardless of who committed it and what their motive was, in that moment we can say we’re on the way to building a sustainable peace and that we did our best to prevent any future war in this region.

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