

Shared Values and Common Interests in the Region: Will the Balkans Ever Overcome its Identity-Based Politics?

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Over the years of university teaching, community preaching and civil society dialogues I have realized that diversity of the Balkans is widely perceived as its liability, a burden and the major source of its problems even by the people who are otherwise peace-loving and not chauvinist. It is true for people from the region and from outside it. This runs contrary to what scientists tell us and against liberal values. But these people probably need to be forgiven because the way the region or rather its main actors have managed its diversity over the last two centuries or so has led many to reach this wrong conclusion. After all, we should not expect ordinary people to distinguish between the problems stemming from diversity and those resulting from its (mis)management when their intellectual and political elites have done their best to diminish similarities and amplify differences which are allegedly cause of all our troubles.

By the way, the Balkan people are not the only ones who have succeeded in turning their potential assets and advantages into their liabilities. Many Middle Eastern countries have managed to do that with the gift of oil. While the rest of the world envies the ME for it, for decades the oil has been that region's curse or at least for its peoples.

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I trust that you here do not belong to this skeptic majority but let me – for heuristic reasons - share with you my frequent experience with visiting Muslim and non-Muslim friends from around the world which I personally take as another proof of the absurdity of our condition. As you can imagine, it usually takes some time to make them understand what is going on here. And then when you think that they have finally got it you are usually asked a final set questions: Do you understand each other? Yes! Do you know who is who in the street? No! Have you lived together before the Communists came to power? Yes! So, why all the bloodshed? Because a chauvinistic minority (or minorities) has managed to convince the majority that they cannot live together and that they are in danger. Those who would not believe them shared the fate of Ivan Stambolić or Srđan Aleksić. If some thought that the centuries of coexistence disprove them they brought in tanks and mortars to prove us that they were right. (Rest assured: coexistence here never needs social engineering. It is division that is by design.)² Consequently, nowadays, unfortunately, many believe that we indeed cannot live together, that our differences are bigger than our similarities. They produced insecurity because it created consent needed for them to rule over their community. With or without reason most people of the Balkans nowadays fear the Other. Fear-mongering has succeeded. Falsified, fake and imagined past has been used to produce real and present mistrust. We now have to deal with it as a reality because, as one history textbook in the Republic of Srpska says, it does not matter any more what really happened at Kosovo Polje in 1389.

We now need to reverse the process... to convince the majority that our diversity and plurality are our advantages, our chance and opportunity... that many fears are irrational and baseless... We have to remove fear factor from our politics... to denationalize and deculturalize problems wherever possible and appropriate and in such a way prevent politization of straightforward vandalism, crime or corruption, for instance, ... Of course, we should not go into the other extreme and relativize and hide hate crimes when they happen. Nuance and balance are crucial here.

Because of the mismanagement of diversity in the past, its proper administration in a sensitive environment of the Balkans is particularly demanding task... There is urgent need for acknowledgement, recognition, and acceptance of the existence, of the identity, the sufferings, fears and aspirations of others... Denial of others' languages, tragedies, and victims has to stop... Our discourses and policies must avoid homogeneity of the dominant culture... They have to be difference-conscious rather than difference-blind ...

It is a task for the counter-minority to do what needs to be done, ... to live up to the challenge so that one day the majority (majorities) will rise against fear-mongering minority (minorities) which has deceived us for too long and too many times already... To speed up the process of fear depletion friendly assistance from outside in the form of security guarantees is most welcome. (Surveys show that the distance between social groups in B&H is

² See, for example, the movie by Tone Bringa, *We are all Neighbours*.

higher than the distance between ethnic groups. However, this discontent does not translate into electoral votes because of the struggle mode in which all ethnic groups still operate. Because of this sense of uncertainty about the final state of B&H it is difficult to expect citizens to rebel against their ethnic elites even when they do not like them. The same obstacle prevents faster and more meaningful reconciliation).³

That however cannot substitute the need for visionary leadership from within which will lead the region into a brighter future... one which will associate the Balkans more with Aristotelian wisdom than with Srebrenica genocide.

Some may be disheartened by the fact that the majority in the region today probably is skeptic about pluralism. They should not be. It was a minority that pushed the region in the abyss of slaughterhouse in the 1940s and again in the 1990s. I refuse to believe and to accept that a minority in the service of evil can prevail over a minority at the service of good. (I am reminded here of the statement: All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing).

Being who I am, I cannot be against identity politics in all circumstances but I do believe that it is high time to limit it to its proper place. For the skeptics I always give the example of Lašva valley. It was the scene of Bosniak-Croat conflict in 1992-93 but today thousands of people as we talk here communicate and interact with each other in dozens of mega stores in that same valley and they do not ask each other about their identities but about the prices of their products. My hope is that we will keep reducing the list of places where we ask each other about our differences and will start using our different identities to open the doors for our joint ventures in markets and forums that might otherwise remain closed for all of us.

³ As for the behavior of politicians it is the structure of incentives inbuilt in the BH constitution and electoral rules that does not encourage reconciliatory discourse or politics. Milorad Dodik admitted this openly. That is why constitutional rearrangement is crucial. (Thanks to Dr. Valery Perry for reminding us of this on this occasion). And while we are working to change this structure, at least the international donors could use their leverage with local politicians to influence their behavior in the desired direction and not simply reinforce the Daytonian rules of the game.