

# CURRICULUM REFORM AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

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**Title: Post-conflict Histories: Peace Education and Curriculum Reform Possibilities (Case Study – Serbia)**

*“In the Serbian case, the teaching of history has served much more as a type of preparatory military training than as a scholarly discipline of critical thinking”.<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction and Background

*“In the Serbian case, the teaching of history has served much more as a type of preparatory military training than as a scholarly discipline of critical thinking”.<sup>2</sup>*

This case study is primarily based on HLC’s internal expertise and previous research, compiled in two recent publications: “Policy Paper: The 1990s Wars in Former Yugoslavia in History Education (2020)”, and, “An Analysis of the contents of history textbooks in Serbia regarding the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the light of the facts established before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (2015)”. These publications mainly covered the analysis of the formal education system and history classes school curriculum in Serbia in relation to the 90’s wars in Yugoslavia. Formal education and curriculum reforms across the states in the Balkan region have been labeled by common, negative characteristics in multiple spheres: formulation of the curricula, textbook content, training and education of teachers and teaching practice. The main issues in the post-Yugoslav space could be described as “an obsession with victimhood, inclusion of narratives in which the nation was the victim and never the aggressor, and the portrayal of a perpetual state of conflict with neighbors, ignoring periods of peaceful coexistence”.<sup>3</sup> The usual model in most southeast countries is the centrally planned and detailed curriculum, which recapitulates more or less the genealogy of the nation.<sup>4</sup>

This case study will also include the inspiring and positive examples of regional informal reforms and initiatives.

## History of Regional Conflicts and Post-conflict Approach

A turning point for the majority of Eastern European countries was the last decade of the twentieth century, which brought destructive political courses and the awakening of nationalism to the republics of the former Yugoslavia after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the communist regimes.

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<sup>1</sup> Dubravka Stojanović, ‘Revisions of Second World War History in Serbia’, in Serbia and the Serbs in the World”

<sup>2</sup> Dubravka Stojanović, ‘Revisions of Second World War History in Serbia’, in Serbia and the Serbs in the World”

<sup>3</sup> Pavasović Trošt, ‘Ruptures’, 719.

<sup>4</sup> Augusta Dimou, “History Textbooks in Southeast Europe Facing the Challenges of the 21st Century”.

More than two decades have passed since the end of the armed conflicts in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, that accompanied the disintegration of Yugoslavia and claimed more than 130,000 lives.

The regional post-conflict approach, spearheaded by the ad hoc UN Security Council-founded International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY<sup>5</sup>), and the prospect throughout the Western Balkans region states of joining the EU, were considered as the primary drivers for seeking justice for past crimes during the post-conflict period. Holding ICTY-indicted war criminals accountable was a precondition for beginning negotiations with the EU. The region saw significant and long-term assistance from the UN, EU and broader international community in the design and implementation of transitional justice mechanisms, such as criminal justice, truth seeking, reparations, and institutional reform. The success of these measures varied.

In spite of notable progress achieved since 2000 in the process of dealing with the past and transitional justice in Serbia and the region, reconciliation across post-Yugoslav societies ethnic, remains a distant aim. Various ethnic groups in the region continue to hold opposing, conflicting views of their joint recent past, while denial and justification of the crimes committed are still widespread. The region has become a battlefield for ‘memory wars’, regardless of the wealth of judicially established facts before the ICTY and available evidence gathered about the atrocities in the former Yugoslavia, and various initiatives aimed at dealing with the past and transitional justice efforts.<sup>6</sup>

In today’s Serbia, the official memory politics are based on a historical revisionism that reduces the 1990s wars to a narrative of Serbian heroes and victims. The other sides of the conflicts are criminalized, and the public discourses in parallel relativize or deny the war crimes committed by the Serbian military, police and paramilitary forces.

The public sphere and media is dominated by stereotypes, particularly by one-sided interpretations of the 1990s wars and crimes, and Srebrenica genocide denial. Convicted war criminals are completely rehabilitated as heroes and patriots in Serbian society; they enjoy state and public support and privileges, and many of them are politically active.

Young people who do not have a direct experience of the 1990s are subjected to these dominant historical narratives on a daily basis in non-formal settings: through the media, political speeches, family and peer groups.

Of all of this, the least importance is given to the victims, whose suffering has eventually disappeared from the collective memory. Victims are only remembered by their families, who remain alone and isolated in their pain. The political elites in the region usually use victims only as part of their one-sided statistics, without any indication of a genuine respect for their suffering.

## Post-conflict Education System in Serbia - An Overview

Two major political changes in Serbia have influenced the ways in which history has been taught over the last few decades: Slobodan Milošević coming to power in 1987, and his overthrow in 2000 when the opposition took power. In both cases, “the newly established

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<sup>5</sup> Since its inception, the ICTY has examined about 4,500 witnesses, held approximately 7,500 trial days and created and collected about 1.6 million pages of transcripts and exhibits. A decade ago, the ICTY made available its database of court documents with all public filings.

<sup>6</sup> HLC, Forum for Transitional Justice, “History textbooks in post-conflict societies: Education for reconciliation?”,

authorities sought, through shifts in the education system, to gain historical legitimation for them, as well as to construct a particular type of tradition”.<sup>7</sup>

The history textbook published in 1992, while the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia were ongoing, was in use in Serbia until 2002, after which a few new textbook editions followed. Until the opening of the textbook market to private publishers in 2010, there was one history textbook for each grade, published by the state-funded publisher. The publishers of textbooks now include public publishing houses and private publishers.<sup>8</sup> The Ministry of Education still has to approve the textbooks before they can be used.<sup>9</sup> The Ministry of Education and its institutions provide a textbook plan [...] upon the recommendation of the Institute for Improvement of Education and the opinion of the National Education Council.

The key textbooks concepts are structured as: 1) necessary knowledge, meaning that 80-100% of students should adopt it, 2) important knowledge (50%), and 3) valuable knowledge (25%).

As an example, in Primary School History Curricula, the war crimes and human rights violations are mentioned in a few vague references under the broader section on “War”. In this section, all specific conflicts, in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, are listed under “War in Yugoslavia (1991-1995)” and marked as 1 (necessary knowledge). The term “Genocide” is also marked by 1, but, besides the definition of the term, all other concepts belonging to the section on genocide refer to Second World War concentration camps, avoiding to mention the genocide committed in Srebrenica. The reference “International Crime Tribunal for Yugoslavia” is placed under the “Peace” section, but marked as a lowest priority concept (3 - valuable knowledge).

The history curriculum for secondary school follows a very similar pattern and provides a list of concepts and events that are supposed to be covered by the teacher within each lesson. While providing some space for the discussion of war crimes, it misses the opportunity to provide further guidelines for teachers.

The judicially determined facts about war crimes, if referred to in education programmes and materials, are presented in a selective and biased manner. In textbooks, there is the constant questioning of the role of international actors such as the United Nations, the European Community, the ICTY, the United States of America and the European Union during the break-up of Yugoslavia. The war in Croatia features most prominently in the textbooks. As opposed to the war in Croatia, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina is least visible in textbooks. The textbooks dedicate little attention to war crimes committed during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and discuss them only in very general terms. Some textbooks list several places where war crimes were committed, but do not offer details about the victims and their ethnic affiliations, or the perpetrators and the legal definitions of their crimes. The high school textbook by Đurić and Pavlović discusses what happened in Srebrenica in July 1995, calling it a war crime and crime against humanity committed by the army of Republika Srpska and paramilitaries against civilians and soldiers. The textbook specifically mentions that the ICTY “qualified this crime as genocide

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<sup>7</sup> Dubravka Stojanović, ‘Slow Burning: History Textbooks in Serbia, 1993-2008’, in ›Transition‹ and the Politics of History Education in Southeast Europe, ed. Augusta Dimou (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2009), 141.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Zakon o udžbenicima [The Law on Textbooks], 27/2018’ (Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije, 2018), Art. 14.

<sup>9</sup> The Law on Textbooks regulates “the preparation, approval, selection, publishing, withdrawal and observation of textbooks and textbook collections, handbooks and additional teaching materials for primary and secondary school”. (Art.1).

but did not link Serbia to this event”.<sup>10</sup> The war in Kosovo is portrayed through the prism of the 1999 NATO bombing of SR Yugoslavia and the damage it caused, with the emphasis on the suffering of Serb civilians in Kosovo during the armed conflict and the NATO intervention. Albanian separatism and the terrorism of the Kosovo Liberation Army are presented as the main causes of the war in Kosovo.<sup>11</sup> The textbooks avoid mentioning non-Serb victims and Serb perpetrators. The focus on Serbian victims reaches its peak in one of the recommended activities for teachers, which states that a teacher should “condemn the still ongoing murders and executions of Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija, who are allegedly protected by agreements which are not applied in practice”.<sup>12</sup>

Both primary and high schools are chronological and place the lessons about the break-up of Yugoslavia as the last or second to last lesson of the given educational cycle. Coupled with the fact that this is the time when students focus a lot of energy and time on their preparation for the next cycle of entrance exams, this means that lessons about the Yugoslav break-up are often not covered at all.

There are not many research projects providing insights into the perceptions of history educators and their everyday teaching practices. One of the rare exceptions is a research project conducted with history teachers in 2017.<sup>13</sup> The survey results showed that the proportion of didactics in the Initial Teacher Training (ITT) is low in comparison to other European countries. Everyday practice, such as teaching, employment and schools, history teachers from Serbia perceive as being fairly low in regard to transparency, qualifications, merit-base in employment and professional development. According to the report, the “curricular expectations are contradictory”. These expectations involve “a clear ethnic bias and often offer only one interpretation”, while simultaneously aiming at “fostering critical thinking and preparing future citizens for understanding and valorizing bias and interpretations”.<sup>14</sup> For all teachers in Serbia it is mandatory<sup>15</sup> to take part continuously in in-service teacher training activities<sup>16</sup> aimed at various aspects of professional development.<sup>17</sup> They are organized by various educational organisation and provided through the web page of the Institute for Improvement of Education.<sup>18</sup> Out of 12 trainings provided in the social sciences section, five relate to history teaching but only one helps teachers to teach the wars related to the Yugoslav breakup. This one training is provided by the Association for Social History – EUROCLIO.<sup>19</sup> The law allows for a specific category of trainings of public interest approved directly by the Minister of Education, organized by the state institutions, financed by the organizer and free for the

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<sup>10</sup> Đorđe Đurić and Momčilo Pavlović, *Istorija za treći razred gimnazije prirodno-matematičkog smera i četvrti razred gimnazije opšteg i društveno-jezičkog smera* (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, 2010), 186.

<sup>11</sup> Analiza sadržaja udžbenika istorije u Srbiji u ratovima u bivšoj Jugoslaviji u svetlu utvrđenih činjenica pred MKSJ, 23.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Podaci o času br. 61 - Srpska država u savremenom dobu’ (Klett), accessed 29 June 2020, <https://www.klett.rs/baza-znanja/5996>.

<sup>13</sup> Rodoljub Jovanović and Dea Marić, ‘Teachers on Teaching: How Practitioners See the Current State and Future Developments in History Education across the Western Balkans’ (The Hague: EUROCLIO, CDRSEE, 2017), <https://www.euroclio.eu/resource/31993/>.

<sup>14</sup> Jovanović and Marić, ‘Teachers on Teaching’.

<sup>15</sup> In order to keep the license to teach, every teacher needs to attend 100 hours of training within every five-year period (with a minimum 80 hours of state-approved trainings).

<sup>16</sup> Such as: professional gatherings, study trips, summer and winter schools.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Pravilnik o stalnom stručnom usavršavanju i napredovanju u zvanja nastavnika, vaspitača i stručnih saradnika’ (Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije, 2017), <https://zuov-katalog.rs/manual/pravilnik.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Zavod za unapređivanje obrazovanja i vaspitanja’, accessed 13 July 2020, <https://zuov-katalog.rs/>.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Nastava moderne istorije jugoistočne Evrope - osposobljavanje nastavnika za multiperspektivni pristup nastavi istorije’, accessed 13 July 2020, <https://zuov-katalog.rs/index.php?action=page/catalog/view&id=175>.

participants.<sup>20</sup> The list of these trainings does not include any trainings dealing with recent history, only one training from the area of history overall, and this one dealing with the fight against antisemitism”.<sup>21</sup>

### Education Reform and Regional Reconciliation

After more than a decade of regional civil society organizations’ effort to establish an official, interstate commission that would list all victims of wars - RECOM<sup>22</sup>, officials of the newly found states, former Yugoslav republics, withdrew support for this initiative in 2019.

The Coalition for RECOM was the most serious civil society initiative ever undertaken in the region, and it aimed to persuade the states of the former Yugoslavia to establish a Regional Commission For Establishing the Facts about All Victims of War Crimes and Other Serious Human Rights Violations Committed on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia in the period from 1991 to 2001. The task of this Regional Commission was to establish the facts on war crimes in an objective manner, regardless of the ethnicity of the perpetrators and victims. The report of the Regional Commission would, for all countries in the region, constitute the very foundation necessary for the incorporation of the facts from the report into their history textbooks, and in such a manner introduce the narrative of the crimes of the wars of the 1990s to the new generations.

Especially in the last few years, regional politicians are dealing with retaining national identity rather than dealing with the past, focusing on education policies as a path to that goal. The regressive and nationalist politics of regional leaders are undeniably affecting educational policies and plans to change curricula and textbooks, especially when it comes to the “group of national subjects”, including history, mother tongue and geography.

Since 2019, Serbian authorities have been talking about official efforts to put these three subjects’ textbooks under stricter state control. In March 2021, it was announced that, at the initiative of the President of Serbia, the state would take complete control over the content of history, geography and Serbian language textbooks.

Striving to make textbook content more “national” has a negative impact on regional reconciliation, even before it is implemented. Recently, after the representative of the Croatian National Council in Serbia stated in the media that Serbian textbooks are denying the existence of the Croatian language, the Croatian Prime Minister told the Serbian President at a meeting on the margins of the EU-Western Balkans summit in Slovenia that he wants the school textbooks that describe the Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin languages as versions of Serbian to be corrected.<sup>23</sup>

## Initiatives for Peace Education: Reforms and Innovations

### Curriculum Reform - Possibilities and Challenges

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Pravilnik o stalnim stručnim usavršavanju’.

<sup>21</sup> Zavod za unapređivanje obrazovanja i vaspitanja, ‘Lista programa od javnog interesa koje rešenjem odobrava ministar’, accessed 13 July 2020, <https://zuov.gov.rs/lista-programa-odjavnog-interesa-koje-resenjem-odobrava-ministar/>.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.recom.link/>

<sup>23</sup> ‘Serbia Urged to Correct Schoolbooks Denying Croatian is a Language’, accessed 7 October 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/10/07/serbia-urged-to-correct-schoolbooks-denying-croatian-is-a-language/>

According to Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, the EU is founded on the principles of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights. These principles are common to the Member States and need to be complied with by candidate countries. As a European Union (EU) candidate country, Serbia is committed to aligning its legislation to the EU legislation in all sectors, including education. The Council of Europe (CoE) has issued numerous recommendations about both formal and non-formal education, with a particular focus on history education.<sup>24</sup>

In the Chapter 23 of Serbia's accession negotiations with the European Union, prosecution of war crimes and strategic reforms aimed at improving war crimes prosecution constitutes a vital segment. In 2016, the Government of Serbia adopted "The 2016 - 2020 National Strategy for the Prosecution of War Crimes" (The National Strategy), implementing the strategic reforms introduced in the Action Plan. The National Strategy briefly addresses the topic of education, within the last of the eight priorities. In addition to outreach activities, access to information and training of media professionals, this objective encompasses "improvement of the curricula in a manner that allows the students/pupils to obtain a sufficient quantity of relevant information on the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, the war crimes committed during that time, and the norms of international humanitarian law". Within the outreach section, the National Strategy addresses formal education, but very briefly, and without binding regulations for educational authorities.

Although education is mentioned, the National Strategy has not initiated any changes in the way the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s are taught. The new 2021-2024 National Strategy draft version, expected to be adopted soon, doesn't even address the topic of education anymore.

### The Importance of Teaching Peace

Universal teaching goals, regardless of the specifics of individual school subjects and education levels, are the goals that imply the adoption of fundamental values of a society. Hence, human rights education, that should include learning about war crimes, reconciliation, building and maintaining peace in post-conflict situation, should be included in several subjects, especially history, while the content of textbooks should correspond to universal values arising from such education.

The real effects of history textbooks are difficult to measure, both because of the methodological challenges to such an endeavour and other factors like teachers, knowledge from family and other sources of socialisation including media.<sup>25</sup> History textbooks mirror the official memory politics and are "a reflection of what the nations want their youth to learn"<sup>26</sup>, and have also been "concertedly and consciously revised to fit the state-preferred national narrative".

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<sup>24</sup> For example, CoE recommendations published in 2018 argue that "there is a danger that omitting events that may be perceived as being controversial or sensitive results in students receiving a distorted and misleading account of the past".

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Tamara Pavašević Trošt, 'Ruptures and Continuities in Nationhood Narratives: Reconstructing the Nation through History Textbooks in Serbia and Croatia', *Nations and Nationalism* 24, no. 3 (2018): 720.



Serbian history textbooks do not offer a critical view of the past and do not encourage critical discussion and multiperspective understanding of the breakup of Yugoslavia and the armed conflicts in the 1990s.

Therefore, informal initiatives should contextualize and relate the official truth to established facts that are absent from school curricula.

### Informal Initiatives for Peace Education

When it comes to dealing with difficult topics such as mass political violence, war crimes and human rights violations, non-state initiatives constitute the biggest part of the efforts within the history education landscape in Serbia. The main areas of intervention of these initiatives are two crucial components of history education: history teaching resources and history teachers. In the sphere of history teaching resources, the projects mostly focus on producing alternative teaching materials for teachers (and to a lesser extent for students) and on conducting history textbook analysis. The latter effort includes facilitating regional cooperation between teachers from different states, and preparing teachers during training to use alternative materials and acquire skills to deal with difficult topics.

The most notable international organisation working in this field in the post-Yugoslav space are the European Association of History Educators (EUROCLIO) and the Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeastern Europe (CDRSEE). Joint History Project, the most prominent programme of the CDRSEE, focused on bringing together historians from Southeast Europe with the task of creating alternative workbooks for history teachers containing primary sources about specific historical periods and events, providing training for teachers in how to use them. In 2017, the CDRSEE promoted to history teachers in the region a history reader which presented the “Yugoslav Wars” from the perspectives of all the countries that participated in them. The reader covers the period 1944-2008, until the Kosovo declaration of independence. It is designed as an auxiliary teaching/learning material for history teachers and pupils. History teachers had received training on how to use the reader.

One of the recent regional projects by EUROCLIO focuses on the “question on how to study the topics of wars in the territory of the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s”.<sup>27</sup> This association has also produced “Recommendations for Responsible Teaching about the Wars of The 1990s”. In addition, the association offers two trainings within the official state-sponsored teacher trainings: one dealing with multiperspectivity, and the other dealing specifically with teaching the wars of the 1990s. The other project, currently implemented by the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Courts (IRMCT<sup>28</sup>) in cooperation with local<sup>29</sup> history teachers associations - introduce judicially established facts into history education in Serbia and the region. Within this project, teachers receive training on using the ICTY and IRMCT archives in order to create and/or complement lessons, and are also provided with novel teaching methodologies to approach the classroom topic of mass violence during the Yugoslav break-up.

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<sup>27</sup> More information available at <http://devedesete.net> (accessed 9 Oct 2021).

<sup>28</sup> The International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT), established by the UN Security Council in 2010, to conclude the remaining work of the ICTR and ICTY.

<sup>29</sup> The project is being carried out in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Smaller, local initiatives, sometimes supported by international funds, play a significant role within the community, especially when it comes to directly influencing teaching staff and their students.

One such initiative is the Schoollegium (*Školegijum*), a “magazine for fair education”, launched in 2011 as a platform for critical analysis of education policies and practices in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as part of a broader campaign for substantial and comprehensive reform of the education system. It draws the public’s attention to indoctrination in curricula, textbooks and practices itself. The founders of the Schoollegium, university professors, teachers, education experts and enthusiast, “call for the responsibility of all participants in the educational process - from the ruling parties, ministries, academic community to the media, teachers, school administration and parents, advocating for a good, fair and free education.” Although it does not concentrate exclusively on peace education, this platform significantly focuses on the post-conflict context, historical revisionism, and nationalism in education.

The latest example of this type of educational programs is the project “Teaching history during the COVID-19 pandemic - equal access for all” of the Center for Civic Education in Montenegro. Implemented with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany, through the German Embassy in Montenegro, the goal of this project is to develop analytical and critical skills in students, through video lessons on sensitive topics of Montenegrin society, available in Montenegrin and Albanian language. The project also includes online seminars for history and social group subjects teachers.

Throughout the years that the ICTY Outreach Programme<sup>30</sup> has been engaged with young people in the former Yugoslavia, it has witnessed time and again their interest in the issues dealt with by the Tribunal. Essay-writing competitions were developed to give them a platform to express their opinions on post-conflict criminal justice. The competitions organized in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2013 demonstrated that students feel a personal connection to the events which overtook their region in the 1990s and to the efforts to achieve justice after the war. More than 200 students took the opportunity to make their voice heard by reflecting on the question “Should we hold trials for war crimes committed during an armed conflict?” The teenagers whose works are presented here were born after the war. In their writing, they demonstrated how they feel the burden of the past, how they hope for the future, and how they view the role of justice in contributing to a peaceful environment.<sup>31</sup>

### **HLC’s Regional and National Schools of TJ**

The majority of young people in Serbia and other post-Yugoslav countries are not aware about even the most basic facts about war crimes committed during the Yugoslav wars. In the absence of formal education on the past and on mechanisms for overcoming violence, the Regional School for Transitional Justice provided the best opportunity for young people from Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo to expand their horizons on the crimes committed in the past, whilst establishing a dialogue with their peers in order to build long-lasting reconciliation in the Balkans. The Regional School for Transitional Justice was organized by the Humanitarian Law Center, Lawyers’ Association of Sarajevo and Humanitarian Law Center Kosovo, as a programme of non-formal education about the facts of committed crimes, transitional justice strategies and dealing with the past. The School offered topics on: facts

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<sup>30</sup> ICTY, About the Outreach Programme at: <https://www.icty.org/en/outreach/outreach-programme>

<sup>31</sup> In their own words: students write on international justice, at: <https://www.icty.org/en/outreach/youth-outreach/essay-writing-competitions>



judicially established before the ICTY; non-judicial mechanisms for the establishment of facts about crimes from the past; victims' right to reparations; the role of the media in the processes of establishing the truth and accountability; culture and conflicts of memory and the process of reconciliation in post-conflict societies. Students also had the opportunity to visit places of crimes and memory in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, and meet the survivors and members of victims' families, where they spoke with them about memory and victims' rights to truth and justice.

Between January 2013 and March 2015, three Regional Schools were attended by 75 participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia. Among them were post-graduate and graduate students, members of political parties, activists from human rights organizations, and young professionals in the public and civil sectors. In order to strengthen the voice of the younger generations in the processes of reconciliation and encourage them to work intensively on dealing with the past, and also to advocate for the inclusion of topics on transitional justice into the formal education curricula, the HLC has decided to publish this collection of several essays prepared by students of the Regional School for Transitional Justice. 'Education for Reconciliation'<sup>32</sup> is a film produced by the Humanitarian Law Center (HLC) on the Regional School for Transitional Justice, organized in January 2013, for 25 participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia. Film 'Education for Reconciliation' follows several students of the School, their impressions on the content of the lectures and personal changes they had undergone while being exposed to topics of the School.

National schools were organized by the HLC alone for six generations of students, between 2011 and 2019, with similar curricula. For example, the Fifth National School of Transitional Justice participants were 25 students of law, security, political science and history, activists from NGOs, journalists, law apprentices and history educators and considered the case studies of *Srebrenica, Kosovo, Vukovar, Oluja, Hrtkovci, Skočić, and Zvornik*. Besides the opportunity to learn about the court-established facts regarding these crimes, the participants were also able to assimilate some of the facts from the victims' perspective. In this manner, they had the opportunity to hear about the experiences of Suvadica Selimovic, from the town of Djulići near Zvornik, and Zijo Ribić, from the town of Skočić near Zvornik, who talked about pre-war life in their villages with their neighbours, about the war events they witnessed, and their fight for truth and justice after the war ended. The agenda also included a visit to monuments in Belgrade which bear witness to the currently dominant ethnically-biased manner of remembering victims' suffering during the wars in the former Yugoslavia.

From 2011 to 2015, the HLC Kosovo has also organized workshops for high school students as part of its programme on dealing with the past. In 2015, there were 16 workshops attended by 591 students. One of the initiatives raised at the discussion was whether transitional justice should be included in the History or Civic Education textbooks. "We have noticed an absence of information among high school students about the basic data on human losses or material damage during the war in Kosovo," then said the HLC Kosovo director Bekim Blakaj.<sup>33</sup> Republic of Kosovo Education minister in February 2016 accepted a proposal from the Humanitarian Law Centre Kosovo for transitional justice to be taught as part of the Civic Education subject on the high school curriculum.

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<sup>32</sup> Movie 'Education for Reconciliation', available at: <http://www.hlc-rdc.org/?p=23289&lang=de>

<sup>33</sup> "Advocating for the inclusion of transitional justice into official high school curriculum" <https://hlc-kosovo.org/sq?p=4340>

## Study Visits and Students Exchanges

The Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR), with headquarters situated in Belgrade, Zagreb, Podgorica, Sarajevo and Prishtina for many years worked to educate young people from the region about the heritage of war through 200 training programmes and more than 150 regional exchange programmes.<sup>34</sup> The YIHR has also organized four Youth Summits which took place in Belgrade, Prishtina, Sarajevo, Zagreb and Skopje. These summits brought together thousands of regional and international youth civic and political activists with the aim of exchanging experiences and initiating the processes of democratic reforms.

The Youth Summits have encouraged and led to the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)<sup>35</sup>, intergovernmental office of Serbia, Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Montenegro. Superschools is a RYCO programme for school exchanges in WB6<sup>36</sup> with the objectives to support the peacebuilding and reconciliation process and intercultural learning and dialogue among schools, students and their communities. The programme is part of a multi donor project “Western Balkans School Exchange Scheme” co-financed by the European Union and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) together with the RYCO. The project contributes to the overall objective of increasing skills and knowledge of young people in the Western Balkans by enhancing education systems and promoting cooperation in the region, through establishing a regional school exchange scheme.

## Publications, Analyses, Surveys and Other Educational Activities

At the end of April 2015, HLC organized an international conference “History textbooks in post-conflict societies: Education for reconciliation?” - on history textbooks and their role in the processes of dealing with the past. International and regional experts working on analysis of content of history textbooks were invited to participate at the conference and present their papers and presentations which are published in this publication. HLC also presented the Analysis of the content of history textbooks in Serbia relating to the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the light of the facts established before the ICTY, in order to show in what way the facts about war crimes committed during the wars in the former Yugoslavia are dealt with in the history textbooks in Serbia, as well as to compare these statements with the facts about these events as established by the ICTY.

In 2018, The HLC had conducted and presented a public opinion survey “Awareness of citizens of Serbia about the wars of the ‘90s, war crimes and war crimes trials in Serbia”. Survey also included students attending primary, secondary schools and universities in Serbia in order to determine their level of knowledge of facts pertaining to the wars in the former Yugoslavia, and history teachers in order to ascertain their views on changing textbooks, on including facts about the wars, etc. On the basis of this survey the HLC made concrete recommendations on including judicially established facts about war crimes in formal and non-formal education material and establishing a broad campaign for reforming teaching material in Serbia.

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<sup>34</sup> Youth Initiative for Human Rights official website: <https://www.yihr.rs/en/about-us/>

<sup>35</sup> Regional Youth Cooperation Office website: <https://www.rycowb.org/>

<sup>36</sup> The overall aim of the WB6 project is to promote cross-border long-term and short-term volunteering as a tool that will contribute to reduction of social and ethnic distance among young people in the region as well as to strengthen their prosocial and European values that will lead to reconciliation, stability and prosperity of the WB6 region.

The feature TV series "Školokrečina" was created on the basis of Nenad Veličković's doctoral thesis entitled "Ideological instrumentalization of literature on the examples of textbooks from the 5th grade of primary to the 4th grade of secondary school in Bosnia and Herzegovina". The thesis and series analyze textbooks used in regular classes in BiH, where Bosniak, Croat and Serb curricula are taught, and clearly show many examples of abuse. The indoctrination with literature results in an increase in xenophobia, nationalism and intolerance, and through textbooks there is a mental occupation that starts from primary schools to university centers, which makes the educational system a "hate forge". Goal of series is to inform and educate young people, students, parents and complete public opinion, and to sensitize the space to the problem of spreading fascist ideas, intolerance, nationalism and manipulation of young people through curricula in primary and secondary schools, as well as the problem of physical separation of young people.<sup>37</sup>

A documentary film by Dino Hodžić "Run Nina" about the Faculty of Dentistry that was the only faculty in besieged Sarajevo that did not stop working during the siege. The documentary "Run Nina" gives an insight into the study of dentistry during the siege of Sarajevo through conversations with the then students - today's professors. What the atypical student life dictated by the war looked like, where and how the exams were prepared, are just some of the topics that show another side of the siege of Sarajevo. The film, which had its premiere on November 29, 2019. year at the Faculty of Dentistry in Sarajevo, is entirely the result of the work of dental students. Dino Hodžić got an idea to make a documentary after he had been involved in the HLC student exchange program.

## Conclusion

Educational and textbook reforms are particularly complex issues.<sup>38</sup> They form part of a comprehensive system including several stakeholders like ministries of education, pedagogical institutes and departments of education, teachers, the public, textbook authors, pupils. Educational reforms meet resistance from various corners, politicians, political groups or parties and other institutions, which use history as a mobilization tool arguing against the falsification of history and the fear of diluting the essence of national identity, while accusing authors of alternative narratives of bias/ignorance and lack of patriotism. Quite characteristic of and also quite disastrous for our educational systems is the fact that often serious and hard won reform efforts in education can be taken back overnight when a given political constellation changes. In conditions of transition, fluidity and crisis societies tend to be more introverted, suspicious and defensive and history acquires a strong compensatory character. Such periods are also conducive to revisionist, arbitrary memory politics and the proliferation of conspiracy theories, which offer simplistic and polarizing historical exegesis and provide easy answers to complex phenomena.

A particular problem of Balkan region (related to the social parameters of education but also to issues of historical and political culture) is the fact that history education is a highly public and political matter. In contrast to other societies where education is regarded to be a more technocratic and professional issue, in this part of the world, history education and textbooks

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<sup>37</sup> Official page & trailer: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fz\\_uB-qspGc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fz_uB-qspGc)

<sup>38</sup> On the technologies of educational reform and concrete case studies See Augusta Dimou (ed.), "Transition" and the Politics of History Education in Southeast Europe. (Eckert. Die Schriftenreihe, vol. 124), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht Unipress, 2009; on other regions see Samira Alayan, Achim Rohde, Sarhan Dhoid, The Politics of Education Reform in the Middle East, New York: Berghahn, 2012; also Joseph Zajda and Macleans A. Geo-Jaja, The Politics of Education Reforms, Dordrecht: Springer, 2009.

are heavily instrumentalized by politics and become targets that provide for easy mobilization. The usual outcome is the well-known history and textbook wars, which are rarely fought on a cognitive or expert level but rather on an emotional and populist one.

In the first place, post-conflict societies must repair discriminatory practices or interferences in the provision of education that often occur during periods of conflicts. In addition, education can be an important vehicle for remembering the past, facilitating the transmission of memory and contributing to the promotion of peace. Because of its formative potential, education can help shape new norms, mediate between contending narratives of the past, and nurture a culture of respect for human rights across generations.

The existence of a large number of non-state initiatives does not necessarily secure improvements in history education. Data on history teachers' perceptions of the educational systems show that many teachers still avoid teaching about the wars that followed the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and those they find the curricular expectations regarding these topics contradictory.<sup>39</sup> Outright official support to history teachers to engage with the wars of the Yugoslav dissolution seems to be the missing link hindering the success of non-state initiatives.

Described circumstances unfortunately mainly imply a lack of support from state educational institutions. That is why it is necessary for independent actors, such as civil society organizations wishing to participate in education reform, to develop strategies to enable changes in the education system that do not necessarily involve institutional curriculum reform.

The experience of civil society organizations in Serbia that have worked on curriculum reform has shown that obstacles are not necessarily purely political and institutional, but, considering that curriculum reform involves long processes, many procedures and numerous actors can also be practical, bureaucratic.

The Autonomous Women's Center, a civil society organization specializing in the problem of violence against women, has been implementing the project "No tolerance for gender based violence" in secondary schools in Serbia since 2016. One part of this project was developing a strategy to include the topic of gender-based violence in teaching, which would precede the official curriculum reform. The result of the project are manuals that many teachers who took part in the project use in teaching today.

That is why it is important that civil society organizations use all the resources and motivate those who directly participate in the teaching process to use existing teaching materials to open topics that are not foreseen in the curriculum, and help students develop a critical attitude towards different interpretations of recent history.

It is therefore essential that individuals among teachers who show interest and enthusiasm to engage in peace education receive appropriate support, training, and alternative teaching materials.

The civil society should be a link between institutions and teachers and support both in their efforts to make positive changes in education. In the circumstances of transition, this inevitably requires openness and creativity of all actors included.

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<sup>39</sup> Jovanović and Marić, 'Teachers on Teaching'.

## Lessons Learned and Way Forward

International recommendations often promote critical thinking, but without a careful analysis of the complex interplay between critical thinking and development of national identity, which is a goal included in the Serbian, as well as almost every other history curriculum. Many of the recommendations overlook the discursive struggles between groups in post-conflict societies over interpretations of the recent violent history, and disregard the fact that, for many teachers, including topics and interpretations that go against the dominant narratives could be dangerous.

What certainly lacks are additional teaching/learning materials, but also additional training for history teachers. We live in an age where information is easily accessible, as a result of which teachers no longer play a crucial role as “bearers of knowledge”. Their role now focuses on motivating pupils and engaging them in critical thinking.

Teachers should not and must not rely on textbooks alone. Other appropriate written and visual materials should be used too, but they should be selected with caution, especially for pupils of this age. Teachers have the freedom to define the schedule and pace of activities for each topic, observing the (formal) aims and objectives of this academic subject.

Teachers are allowed and should use a diversity of relevant sources which can help pupils to form a clear idea of given historical events, processes and personalities. Teachers should strive to teach students to be critical thinkers – that is, the ability to sift facts from assumptions, distinguish between evidence and its interpretation, and separate the relevant from the irrelevant. The teacher must advise pupils which materials to consult for learning or research. By no means should pupils be exposed to images and films that might inspire horror and confusion in them. Such materials are degrading also for the victims themselves.

The selection of an appropriate methodological approach becomes very important. There is no one correct approach to teaching and learning that fits all the participants in the education process. Questions have a special place in the teaching of history – both the questions teachers ask pupils and the questions asked by pupils spurred on by what they have heard in the classroom or discovered outside the classroom by using a variety of sources of information.

Only by learning about the past in an impartial manner, gives a chance to create the conditions for understanding and dialogue, which would then guarantee a peaceful future in the region. The process of dealing with the past could lead our society towards an environment where there would be no room for the manipulation of numbers of victims, where victims would receive equal respect, and where impunity for crimes would not be acceptable. Such a society would serve as guarantee that the cycle of violence and crime will not be repeated in the future.

## Recommendations

For governments and board of education:

- Provide for the full implementation of the National Strategy for the Prosecution of War Crimes in the sphere of education and focus on the main aims of enhancing knowledge about the armed conflicts of the 1990s.
- Provide a detailed explanation of the events related to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the armed conflicts that ensued, based on the judicially established facts and documents available in the ICTY and IRMCT archives.



- Provide a balanced representation of war crimes committed during the 1990s wars that deal critically with the crimes committed by Serbian armed and police forces.
- Provide the inclusion of teachers in the decision-making processes, through their associations or other bodies.
- Provide sufficient space for these themes in the curriculum (additional special thematic classes, and providing space within other subjects, such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, constitution and rights of citizens, and geography, etc.).
- During the curriculum development process, take into consideration the existing recommendations, teaching resources, research and analysis of various aspects of history education in Serbia, and the existing non-state initiatives related to education.
- Include more of the in-service teacher trainings dealing with the 1990s wars and already created within various projects into the official list. Create a new one.
- Provide teachers with adequate tools, knowledge and unambiguous support for discussing these topics with their students.
- Provide relevant facts to their students, develop students' critical thinking skills, and allow for debate and self-reflection.
- Provide guidelines on how to approach sensitive topics and pay attention that the content is adjusted to the age of the students, steering clear of emotional language, and avoiding sensationalist sources and methods.
- Provide for more clarity and determination on the part of educational authorities when it comes to difficult and controversial topics from the recent past.
- Provide guidelines on novel teaching approaches.
- The universities should develop the initial training for history teachers to include more didactics, with more practice as well as specific preparation for teaching the topics related to the 1990s wars.
- Be open to cooperate with civil society organizations and make use of their expertise.

For civil society organizations (media, museums and other non-formal educational actors and non-governmental organizations dealing with history education and the legacy of the conflicts):

- Become a link between state educational institutions and teaching staff and support teachers in implementing educational reform ideas bottom-up.
- Develop alternative educational programs for students and teaching materials applicable to regular classes.
- In cooperation with the academic community, develop and offer appropriate education programs for teaching staff, but also board of education representatives that should implement education reform.
- Monitor announcements of potentially dangerous, regressive changes in curricula and textbooks that could endanger peace and upset reconciliation processes and respond to them in a timely manner.
- Monitor, analyze and regularly report on potentially dangerous content of teaching materials and curricula and textbooks changes announcements to the competent international bodies and institutions.
- Organize discussions on peace education and invite all the responsible actors - from board of education representatives to representatives of parents - to take part.
- In addition to existing alternative educational programs, develop alternative content acceptable to young people that could be distributed via the Internet and social media.

For international bodies and institutions:





# GIJTR

Global Initiative for Justice,  
Truth & Reconciliation

 Humanitarian Law Center

- To support educational reforms by conditioning Serbia's accession and other integrational processes
- To support local civil society in their attempts to take active part in the process of institutional curriculum reform
- To be familiar with the specifics of local contexts and unique obstacles actors from different backgrounds could face in relation to education reform processes
- To support various professional educational programmes for history teachers in advanced didactical tools which follow the trends of European and international historiographic developments?