

CURRICULUM REFORM AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

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Title: **Serbian Meandering through Thick and Thin Of Transitional Justice and Human Rights Education**

Section 1: Introduction and Background

Introduction

This case study was designed with the idea of highlighting good practice examples in both formal and non-formal education in the field of transitional justice and human rights in Serbia. The research for the case study was conducted by Fund B92 team members in three parts – desk top research of relevant and recent surveys of the topic done by local or international organizations and scholars, media reporting on the education reforms and obstacles in implementing them and official web sites of largest stake-holders; electronic questionnaires shared with elementary and high school teachers working in the field and with which Fund B92 collaborates through its various projects, and interviews done with experts who collaborated either on Fund B92 human rights projects or those similar undertaken by other civil society organizations in the country. The combination of these approaches hopefully will provide a broader and more diverse perspective on both formal and non-formal education in the field of human rights in Serbia and the wider region.

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Background

More than 20 years have passed since the last of the so-called Balkan wars has ended, and more than 30 since the first one started. Beginning of 1990-ies saw liberation in most of Europe with falls of the Iron Curtain and the Berlin wall, and disintegration of the Eastern Bloc. Europe was moving in the new positive direction, but leaders of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia in the south-east of the continent had their own ideas. Nationalistic populist politicians leading largest and most prosperous federative republics which made up the country wanted out of the joint union, instead of working together to join the European Union. First the propaganda war started, dividing the public, that once held “brotherhood and unity” as the highest value, by national lines, instigating decades old grievances regarding unsolved WWII war crimes committed by all nations comprising ex-Yugoslavia. Wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and bombing of Serbia and Montenegro by NATO marked the decade for all living in this region. More than hundred thousand lives were lost (Map of war victims in former SFRJ 1999-2001, 2018), several hundred thousand people were wounded, and millions lost or were forced to leave their homes, with inflation, isolation, economic and cultural destruction. Instead of being known for famous tourist destinations at Adriatic coast, rich historic and cultural heritage or hospitality of its people, the region became recognizable



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by toponyms which suffered horrendous atrocities, first in Europe after WWII – Vukovar, Srebrenica, Sarajevo... Oppression and silencing of the anti-war pro-democracy voices was strongest in Serbia, marked by most Western democracies as “the bad guy” in the conflicts. The state propaganda thus marked its opponents as “traitors and foreign mercenaries”, using every avenue available¹, including school curricula, to force national(istic) unity based on victimhood and mythical narratives that amplified national pride.

Everything was subordinate to justifying the wars that were going on – from changing university courses from Serbo-Croatian language² and linguistic studies to Serbian language and literature studies, to diminishing or entirely erasing events from history books or authors and their works from literature text books. The biggest turn in relation to the previous interpretation of history, and education itself based on the idea of class struggle, was that the basic protagonist of history and other subjects in all levels of education became the “Serbian people” (Stojanović 2013).

Children as young as 8 or 9 years were exposed to text books content that suggests that the past has a mystical course over which individuals or groups can have no influence. In this way interpreted geography and history in combination with the use of indefinite verb forms and formulations such as “then the war came”, “sanctions happened to us”, “we were bombed”, through education introduces irrationality into the way of thinking and suggests surrendering to a destiny that no one can influence ((Stojanović 2013). Individual responsibility and care for the collective, a valued and promoted behavior in former Yugoslavia, was almost completely erased from educational practices.

However, as early as beginning of the wars and appearance of first groups of refugees fleeing war zone, first psychosocial workshops to help refugees’ children were held by non-governmental organizations, which evolved first to projects dealing with prevention of social conflicts and then in numerous human rights programs. Expertise was poured from universities to civil society organizations, since the institutions were heavily controlled by the state and its war-mongering nationalistic narrative. What experts could not do within the system, they did in the non-governmental sector (Kovacs Cerović 2013). With the fact that at the same time George Soros started establishing offices of his Fund for open society across the region and funding these kind of education activities, the real education for democracy began. The main motive was to ensure that the generations of young people exposed to political and war propaganda created mechanisms, knowledge and skills for non-violent conflict resolution, and thus prevent the perpetuation of violence (Kovacs Cerović 2013). The civic sector became, and stayed until today, the barer of educational reforms.

However, little has been done in two decades since the end of the conflicts in terms of (the official) reconciliation. State Commission for truth and reconciliation in Yugoslavia was formed six months after democratic changes in the country, with the goal to inform the citizens of Serbia what went on during the conflict – the state propaganda held them virtually in the dark regarding war crimes and atrocities committed in their name, reporting (and amplifying) only stories of Serbs’ sufferings. Initiator of the idea to form the Commission, new democratic Minister of Foreign Affairs explained it then further as the need to shift responsibility from the entire nation to individuals who committed those crimes. And to put those people, with their names and surnames, on trial (Ast 2000). In early

¹ Founder of Fund B92, independent B92 Radio was banned several times during the 1990s, with its editor-in-chief arrested on few occasions

² Former official name of the language still spoken by Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, Montenegrins.

days the Commission had almost 80% of citizens' support, but from the inception its work was overshadowed by distrust in the part of the public dealing with human rights and truth and reconciliation issues regarding the sincerity of both the founder of the Commission, the then center-right Serbian president Vojislav Koštunica, and the Commission itself (Didanović 2003). The Democratic Opposition of Serbia, wide coalition that brought Milosević's dictatorship down in September 2000 elections, was deeply divided in terms of approach to past events and dealing with Serbia's role in them, especially on the work of the Hague Tribunal (International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia - ICTY) established by the UN to prosecute the war crimes that had been committed during the Yugoslav wars and to try their perpetrators. The political scene in Serbia turned into a permanent political conflict, between nationalist anti-Hague forces and pro-democratic EU oriented groups and individuals, the division that is still burdening the society. This was and still is the biggest obstacle on the path to truth and trust, i.e. reconciliation, both in Serbia itself and in other countries of the former Yugoslavia (Nikolić-Ristanović 2004).

Nevertheless, first years after the fall of Milosevic saw several initiatives by independent media and (again) non-governmental organizations to start the process of reconciliation among former Yugoslavia successor states – from radio shows (B92 radio 2001) and documentary production and screenings (B92 Radio 2001) to gathering facts, information and proof about atrocities, victims, missing persons (Map of war victims in former SFRJ 1999-2001, 2018), to organizing international conferences on reconciliation, bringing together local human rights experts, renowned global peace activists to share different models of peace building and highest officials in the new democratic state. Quaker Peace and Social Witness research for Serbia and Montenegro from 2004 found that majority of the organizations involved in activities dealing with the past are working in the wider context of the topic creating indirect educational projects for youth through collecting documentation and research, arts and culture, direct assistance to victims, advocacy and influence on the public sphere, public events and debates, media, cross - border cooperation, publishing and exhibitions (Blagojević & Milenković, 2004).

There were other scattered (and pressured by EU and USA) steps taken by Serbian state – from apologies by state officials and the Parliament, to cooperation with The ICTY in terms of arresting and sending accused of war crimes to trial, including former president Slobodan Milošević himself, as well as providing evidence, documentation and securing witnesses for the trials. In 2010 the Parliament passed the resolution that expressed sympathy to the victims of Srebrenica genocide and apologized for not doing enough to prevent the massacre, but never called it “genocide” as The ICTY ruled it to be. The measure came after 13 hours of debate in the Parliament, held at the time mostly by pro-Western Democrats and Socialists, the same party led by Milosević during the conflicts. The underlying hope, as international media reported at the time, was to win EU and investor favor with the measure (Tanner 2010). This became even more pressing issue after EU renewed attention on the Western Balkan countries' accession process in 2018, accompanying it with stronger emphasis on reconciliation, seen as an inseparable part of the accession process (Perchoc & Lilyanova, 2019). The 2018 report on Serbia urges it to further promote European values in public debate and in education, and to establish an atmosphere conducive to meaningful regional cooperation. The report recalls that high-level officials' and state bodies' actions and messages have a key impact in this regard, particularly pointing to instances when ICTY-convicted war criminals were given access to public fora. It voices concern over the lack of cooperation as regards the ongoing case against Serbians having shown contempt of court and recalls that Serbia needs to fully and unequivocally implement the ICTY's rulings and decisions. The report also notes that Serbia's new war crimes prosecutorial



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strategy has been 'severely delayed', its legal framework is preventing some war crime victims from exercising their rights, and wartime sexual violence has not been adequately addressed (Perchoc & Lilyanova, 2019). The situation remains largely unchanged until today, with politicians in power in most of the regional states still using divisions ignited in public 30 years ago to further deepen hiatus in societies for their own political and personal gains, and public getting more and more confused and divided on its and once-brotherly nations' roles in the conflict.

Section 2: Reforms and Innovations

The modernization of the Serbian school system started immediately after democratic changes in 2000 with one of the fundamental goals – to develop democracy in a war-torn ideologically divided country.

Thus first reforms from the period of early 2000s saw Civic Education course introduced as a subject in schools, but as “an obligatory elective course” with (or opposite to) religious studies, which still stokes debates in the society. New democratic educational authorities embarked on a massive task of democratizing entire school system – they formed new school boards with parents for the first time getting limited role in decision-making, encouraged initiative and creativity among teachers and students alike, introduced number of standards and a system for professional development of teachers with all successful non-governmental programs, along with other programs created by universities or schools, being accredited. Large-scale consultations supported by Fund for Open Society were held with almost ten thousand people from the education system participating, which formed a base for the first package of reforms (Kovacs Cerović 2013).

History textbooks were also changed very soon after the regime change but the essence remained the same. According to some historians, the main bearer of history remained the collective, the Serbian people which is essential for maintaining continuity with Milosevic's value system and a deep ideological connection with that time (Stojanović 2013). The greatest similarities are, according to this view, in the “mythical attitude towards the past and the glorification of collectivist, nationalist and premodern values, with the authoritarian and patriarchal identity matrix as a key model and history that is offered as a fate and a metaphysical evil before which there is no room for choice”. Depriving teaching of history of multiperspectivity and different points of view, this kind of approach to history education erases every concept of personal responsibility, developing an irrational attitude towards the past (and the present!) and again postponing moment of facing the past (Stojanović 2013).

The second decade of the new century was primarily characterized by preparation of educational system for European integration, but enthusiasm has waned somewhat – one teacher's statement illustrates the practitioners' attitude in that period all too well: “Can you guarantee that what we start now will really continue, because only under that condition do we want to continue working on the reform. If you can't guarantee it, then nothing” (Kovacs Cerović 2013). One of the reasons for this kind of “ultimatum” can be found, as Kovacs Cerović (2013) states, in problem with the autonomy of schools, which is also a question of decentralization and the possibility of school, i.e. those who work in the school to really get both competencies and the right to deal with the education of children, and not by listening to instructions from local or state authorities, whoever is in power at any given moment.



Beginning of 2020s saw an even newer reform oriented towards achievement of outcomes and development of students' competencies, while the knowledge of human rights is developed during both primary and secondary cycles of education and through multidisciplinary approach, i.e. human rights education should be embedded in subjects such as history, geography, Serbian language, art and science. This is in line with holistic approach to human rights education upon which UNESCO insists, meaning that it should not be only one teaching unit within already overbooked curricula but it should be designed to enable young people to develop their skills in the direction of respect for human and civil rights through education (UNESCO UIS 2012).

As recent research from Civil Rights Defenders on human rights education in Serbia states, the starting point for the development of these curricula is the need to train students on children's rights and human rights, i.e. to prepare them for responsible participation in a democratic society. The area of human rights in the education system is addressed through: 1. *General outcomes of primary and secondary education and upbringing*, which are provided above in keeping with the relevant normative framework; 2. *general interdisciplinary competencies* which refer to, *inter alia*, responsible participation in a democratic society; 3. *key competencies for lifelong learning*, including student's ability to take active and democratic participation in the community; 4. *outcomes in the new curricula* for the general and elective subjects which are related to different aspects of human rights; and 5. *different forms of student participation*, through project-based instruction, extracurricular activities and student's parliament, which enable student learning through the application of skills which are relevant to the exercise of human rights (cooperation, tolerance, awareness-raising with regard to organizations which deal with the protection of student rights) (Koturović 2021).

Sounds very encouraging, but in a study conducted immediately after latest reform started 2 years ago, practitioners from schools pointed out that the basic goals and content of the reform are not clearly defined, that a clear vision and accompanying strategy for the development of school practice has not been developed, a satisfactory level of general agreement on the necessary changes has not been reached, and it is introduced into school practice through changes that are not mutually harmonized and that take place without a single, common framework (Habib & Ovesni, 2019).

During 20 years of ongoing transitional period, Serbia had on average elections every 2.5 years and 10 ministers of education, majority of which came from center-right nationalistic leaning parties. Implementation of reforms was thus not only interrupted or reversed several times, but also depended on fragile political system and interests of its actors. Civil Rights Defenders research states that „the school syllabus is based on an adequate normative framework, but implementation is lacking”, with its participating teachers arguing that “the education system is a reflection of the state of society as a whole” and that “we have all this only on paper, but it does not substantially work in practice” (Koturović 2021), stance confirmed by number of civil society conducted research. Also, the researchers argue that the system expects that teachers will on their own apply the human rights values in school, with no questioning of their own attitudes or prejudices and no requirement for them to present various topics in a way that is adjusted to the human rights principles - controversial topics are largely skipped, almost as though if they were taboo topics (e.g., wars caused by the breakup of Yugoslavia, LGBTI+ issues, hate speech, gender equality and the like) (Koturović 2021).

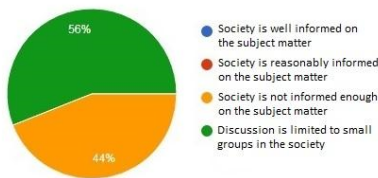
Research among experts and teachers conducted specifically for this case study shows similar results. One of the interviewed participants stated that teachers are unprepared or afraid to talk about the conflict of the 90s, and that it “seems that quasi-media and various inflammatory groups are more successful in influencing young people and their view of the past”, adding that, without any control,



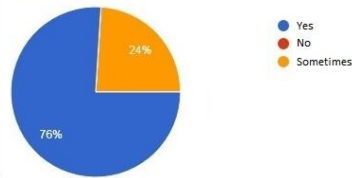
there are often situations where teachers themselves send confusing messages to students or do not raise these topics “justifying it with statement that politics should not be introduced in schools, which leads me to the conclusion that they themselves are not aware of what political action in school really is and what is a healthy critical attitude towards the world and the realities of human rights”. Others confirmed this statement with comments that discussions about the wars in the former Yugoslavia are indeed a taboo topic in schools, that students are confused by the cacophony of political messages in the society, and that the issue of responsibility and dealing with the past is a difficult topic for them, i.e. they refuse to accept the responsibility of our state while “Others” are always to blame for all conflicts and victims.

Majority of participating teachers in our survey stated that topics on recent history and abuses of human rights are represented in school textbooks partially and/or with distortions (72%), while another 20% agree that even with such representation there is not enough time to discuss them with students due to curricular pressures. All the more reasons for 76% of the participants to agree that there are difficulties in society when it comes to facing up to the past and violations of human rights in past and present, and all of them agreeing that citizens are not informed enough about transitional justice issues or that the discussion is limited to smaller groups within the society (please refer to illustration below).

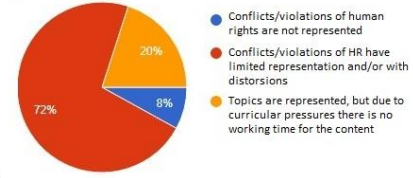
How do you rate knowledge on transitional justice in Serbia?



In your opinion, are there difficulties in the society in facing the past and topics related to conflicts/violations of human rights past and present?



In your opinion, are topics on recent history of the country and violations of human rights represented in school textbooks:



Again, in comes civil sector organizations with their informal and accredited programs. Even though the updated edition of the UNESCO Manual from 2020 emphasizes that human rights education cannot be solely the responsibility of NGOs and youth organizations, but that states have a major responsibility in implementing these programs, in ways that foresee a role for both the formal and non-formal education sectors (Compass 2020), there seems to be, according to respondents to our survey as well as other recent studies, lack of coordination and cooperation between state authorities and civil sector.

Serbian Ministry of Youth and Sports takes care of non-formal youth education at the national level, which is also defined in the Law on Youth (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2014), and is included in the National Youth Strategy for the period 2015 – 2025 (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2015). However, non-formal education in the field of human rights is not specifically defined in these documents, whereas it is mostly focused on citing international and European standards, guidelines and plans.

Educational programs conducted by civil society organizations in the field of human rights are most often created for young persons between 15 and 30 years of age, while human rights schools that are continuously held on an annual basis are intended for secondary school students. Civil society organizations with their record in non-formal human rights education were also subject of the comprehensive research recently, which showed their opinion that the topics of environmental



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protection, transitional justice, and dealing with Serbia's war past and crimes from the 1990s, are not sufficiently represented in the existing non-formal education programs, although they all point out that there are successful programs on these topics (Bobičić, Končar & Duhaček, 2021). Some of them were implemented in last couple of decades by the Humanitarian Law Center, Helsinki Committee, Radio B92, Youth Initiative for Human Rights, Center for Cultural Decontamination, Context Gallery, Teacher of the Ignorant Project, Dah Theater, Center for Applied History, Center for Yugoslav Studies, EuroClio. Some of them are representative either for their longevity, their influence on the society or formal educational system, or their large scale.

The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia is one of the oldest and most active non-governmental organizations in the field of human rights in the country. Their regional school of human rights, "seeking to cope with nationalistic prejudice and the culture of violence, and build the practically non-existent culture of memory" is also one of the longest programs of this kind in the region, for almost 20 years annually gathering youth from all over the Balkans to discuss important issues connected to (post)conflict, visit sites of atrocities and talk to survivors. Debates about dealing with the past have proven to be very interesting and delicate, according to editor of the Helsinki Committee's Manual for teachers and practitioners (Džombić & Domonji, 2019), with large number of the students entering the discussions with parallelism ("Yes, we have committed crimes, but so have they; yes, we have to face the dark past, but they also have to face it"), trivialization ("None of us knows what was going on in a man's head before he took up arms and killed innocent people") and fatalism ("There is no way to escape from the crime, because the crime is inscribed in the nature of the war"). However, as one of the trainers points out, Human Rights Schools are a "significant and dramatic experience" for each participant, especially when they were held in Srebrenica or similar places, while the debates showed that the opinions and attitudes of the participants are subject to influence and revision (Džombić & Domonji, 2019).

This was also the case with youth participating in Fund B92's own educational programs, such as Back to the Past or Re:Generation. In both projects we saw young people expressing proudly their stereotypical views on past or current events, minority groups and violations of human rights through moderated debates, and the effects of correctional influence of their peer group. In several cases the arguments from the peer group were so powerful and compelling that stereotypical stands were immediately and publicly averted. The Back to the Past project used the Time Travel role-play method, devised by Fund B92 partner from Sweden the Kalmar County Museum, and combined it with preparatory workshops and follow-up discussions. During the Time travel event, students "travelled back" to the day in 1941 in which Nazi occupational forces in Belgrade announced that all Jews must register, with students being given roles of neighbors at that time – Jews, Serbs and Roma people. Some of the key questions discussed with them during and after the event were who they should help first in the bombarded city, whether Jews should register or hide, and if this Nazi order will divide them. All these issues were connected with present problems in „accepting the Other“ in Serbian society, and it proved extremely significant since students selected to participate were from different Belgrade minority and social backgrounds. The follow-up lively discussions provided them better insight and understanding of the concept of tolerance and pluralism, and further on motivated autonomous critical thinking and respect for all participants.

Re:Generation project was solely turned to the regional youth with its many interconnected innovative segments dealing with peace and reconciliation. Fund B92 implemented it from 2013 till 2016 in cooperation with BBC Media Action, Youth Initiative for Human Rights Bosnia and



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Herzegovina and IPSOS Strategic Marketing. One of its strands gathered young people from 6 regional countries (Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia), learning about video activism, campaigns and debates through theory and practical work in various workshops and online communication. Through this informal “school of activism”, youth not only acquired knowledge that was further used in promotion of other Re:Generation strands – web series #JustSaying (Fund B92 2013) and online activists’ platform #YouSayIt, but also instigated deep discussions among participants, some of whom haven’t met anyone from different national group but their own before entering the project. The first regional web-series for teenagers #JustSaying speaks openly about issues that are important for youngsters – from real opportunities to family relations, and understanding and relating to other people. It is a trigger for serious thoughts, an initial spark for conversation, and at the same time a wakeup call for young regional generation to outgrow problems which were inherited from their parents and to cross the borders, political and inner boundaries, pre-shaped by them. An activist online platform #YouSayIt was designed for young people from the Balkan region as a meeting point where they can talk about themselves and their wishes, problems, hopes and fears; about friends and parents, school, work, dates; trips they made and those they wish to make. Through such exchange, young people discovered their similarities and differences. In more than 200 short videos, youngsters from the region talk about things that trouble them. This unique “voice of the generation” unfortunately depended from donor support, as so many of similar programs are, and with it drying out, it ceased to exist.

Other civil society organizations cite the same problem as one of the crucial obstacles in achieving greater influence in education system and the society. In most of their answers in the research questionnaires, civil society organizations emphasize the need for the expansion of educational programs, and an increase in the number of people that these programs will reach. One strategy they mention is the increase of financial assistance for this kind of work, as well as a more stable long-term support, instead of one-year projects. Another potential strategy is the cooperation with institutions, primarily and secondary schools, so that the methods and materials that the civil society is already developing might be used in the formal education system (Bobičić, Končar & Duhaček, 2021).

Fund B92’s Free Zone Junior program does just that. Created in 2006 with an aim to initiate dialogue and expand knowledge in Serbia on human rights, and current social and political issues across the globe, the program contributes to development of critical thinking among the youth through usage of engaged films in education, and increase their media literacy, tolerance, and deconstruction of prejudice and stereotype. The program has grown over the years, and today it encompasses activities in all levels of formal education (elementary and high schools, and universities), as well as extracurricular programs for high school students.

In more than 15 years Free Zone Junior produced 4 *Manuals for using film in education in elementary and high school education*, accompanied by appropriate DVD compilations with selection of documentary and feature films. Seminar for the teachers on using film as educational tool was so far attended by more than 1700 elementary and high school teachers across Serbia, and the program is accredited by Bureau for education development.

Part of the program are also three different engaged documentary film workshops for high school students: *Regional camp of Engaged Film* so far gathered over 60 high schools students from Serbia and region, which had had the opportunity to learn how to realize their ideas into films with the support of professionals, *Filmmaker Documentary Film School* focused on Belgrade secondary



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schools, and *Traveling Cinema* with workshop on media literacy and students' video exhibition, in which 1600 high school students from 45 Serbian towns participated by now. The goal of these workshops is to offer high school students an insight into potential of social activism, different aspects of creating engaged documentary film, and to encourage them to take part in intercultural dialogue, encourage and support development of creative ideas. The program, one of the longest and most successful ones in Fund B92 portfolio, continues today with partnering projects in Kosovo and around the region, constantly seeking advice from both of its primary target groups – youth and their teachers. Some of the program participants' comments illustrate vividly how these kind of initiatives influence their perspectives: "This was eye opening experience for me. I've learned a lot about my peers coming from a different cultural backgrounds".

History teachers are both the implementers and a target group of the Thessaloniki Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, which in 1999 brought together 60 historians from all eleven countries in the region first to conduct comparative analysis of history textbooks from all Southeast European countries, and based on that analysis decide how to approach different narratives about same events in SEE countries. First step showed that all nations, from Slovenia to Cyprus, present themselves in textbooks as the only historical victims, especially as victims of all surrounding nations, which is why participating historians opted for a new approach to history - multiperspectivity. This means that students are given the opportunity to analyze the same event or problem from several different, even opposite points of view and come across the obvious similarities that all the peoples of the region have gone through: hunger, great suffering, fear and loss.

Until today the group jointly created 7 history textbooks dealing with most traumatic events in history of all nations in the Balkans – from occupation by Ottoman Empire and rise of the Nation States through Second World War and the Cold War, up to recent wars, divisions and integrations. According to its authors, the goal of this massive project was to break down a generally accepted myth that this region is synonymous with brutality, cruelty, violence and bloodshed. They also point out that it was also an act of public responsibility of participating historians, who in regional societies, traumatized or served by nationalism, try to face various untruths, distortions and manipulations (Ast 2005). The textbooks were offered to all regional educational authorities as supplementary educational tool, with organization of special seminars to encourage and empower teachers to use them. Serbian Ministry of Education included first four textbooks (Ottoman Empire, Rise of Nation States, Balkan wars from 1912-1913 and WW2) as supplementary resource and even accredited seminars for history teachers. However, when the Group came closer to modern time and presenting recent conflicts in new textbooks, reaction from parts of the establishment and teachers, but also some parents and groups in the public was more than strong. As recent as August 2021 members of the Thessaloniki Center's partner organization in Serbia, Association for Social History EUROCLIO were subject to threats and insults on social networks after some media, as well as some colleagues, accused them of "serving the Serbian Hague truth" about the wars of the 1990s. The cause for this attack is a seminar for teachers on the use of the archives of the Hague Tribunal, while the president of the Association explains that it is "a broader campaign that has been going on for a long time, and which is directed against those who teach history in a professional way, try to overcome divisions and approach the study of all problematic and sensitive topics a professionally"(Martinović 2021).

Section 3: Lessons, Reflections and Recommendations



What practice and numerous studies, including this one, show is that the treatment of topics of transitional justice and human rights primarily depends on the enthusiasm of individuals and that, as a rule, it comes down to the mechanical transition of the given material, if the teacher has enough time. As one of our interviewed experts put it, „I would rather say that individuals support these activities”, clarifying that in the Ministry of Education there are individuals who deal with these topics and through various projects and activities try to promote their importance and inclusion in the education system, and at the school level, it is left to individuals to include the mentioned topics in their work with young people, in accordance with their personal beliefs and interests. Most often, these are teachers who are open to "new" topics, who are professionally improving, participating in the creation and implementation of projects at the school, national or international level.

Others stated that reconciliation policies and transitional justice issues are not represented in the program at all, while national history is presented in a way that reinforces a sense of vulnerability and reproduces nationalist discourse. The identity that is being built is strictly ethnic, while minorities and differences (if they are represented) are treated as undesirable and something that is dangerous for a narrowly defined "national unity".

Within the workshop for teachers *History in the discussion* conducted by Fund B92 during 2018, that relied on the project archives of three hundred history textbooks that have been in circulation in various official educational programs in the ex Yugoslav region, the most striking for moderators was that for most of teachers there is confusion and a lack of insight into their own "blind spots" in contemplating the dominant narrative. While teachers easily recognized ethnocentrism and ideological manipulation in textbooks from Croatia or Bosnia, this is generally not the case when it comes to textbooks from Serbia, which may be an indication that they also significantly reproduce the dominant ideological narrative represented in domestic textbooks. It also seems to moderators that there is a kind of linear and closed understanding of history where the origins are understood as those that were the only possible and the tendency to reduce history only to historical events.

Goal of the workshop was to detect a kind of transition in definitions of terms, as well as various narrative and interpretive tendencies in the presentation, interpretation and valorization of historical events and processes related to this term. According to the findings gathered during implementation, teachers are generally confused but there are among them still individuals who are able to recognize revisionist narratives and provide alternative explanations. The problem is the younger generation of teachers who have obviously grown up without a critical approach to history and without the possibility of obtaining knowledge: some of them have shown a complete inability to analyze material while at the same time reproducing the main revisionist narrative or stereotypes. However, there was an openness to criticism on their part, as if for the first time they heard another opinion that differs from repeating the same empty phrases.

Representation of transitional justice topics also depends on the position of the profession in the conception of state educational policies, as well as on the wider social events. The closer these policies and events are to certain topics, the greater or lower is their representation, but not always and not in the same way in terms of understanding and evaluation. Simply put, daily political dynamics have a disproportionately large impact on the representation, receptivity, and applicability of these topics in curricula. The key resistance to dealing with the past comes from all levels of institutions and state policy that is promoted through controlled media. This type of policy radicalizes the whole society, so resistance also appears as parental resistance. Often educational institutions

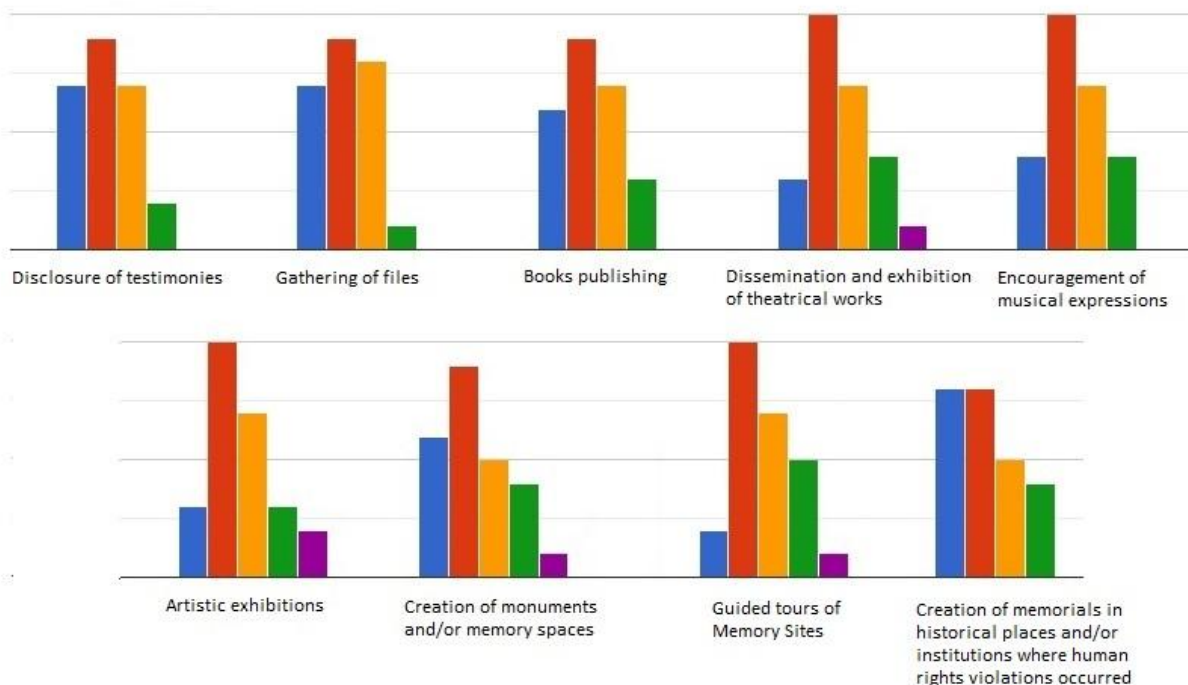
give up on opening topics, fearing the reaction of parents and / or superiors. An additional factor is that many school principals have very large powers and share this type of discourse.

It is important to emphasize that the sources of these difficulties in dealing with the past and issues related to conflicts / human rights violations in the past and present are not one-sided, unambiguous, nor are the reasons for the difficulties monocausal. Human rights as a conceptual and legal corpus have also been used as a selectively observed and understood political weapon, often even for the purpose of violating some human rights. Difficulties in dealing with the past have always been and will remain a problem of modern societies, but they are of various natures and various reasons, and the subject of resistance from various institutions, not only educational.

Participants in survey and interviews conducted for this case study agree that there are not enough activities in formal education such as guided tours of Memory Sites, publication of books, dissemination and exhibition of theatrical works, creation of memorials in historical places and/or institutions where human rights violations occurred, artistic exhibitions or musical expressions on human rights issues (please refer to illustration below).

In your opinion, teaching institutions stimulate actions (in the field of human rights and transitional justice) such as:

Not at all Rarely Sometimes Often Very often



One of the participating experts stated that the listed activities are mostly present in schools when the concepts of self-victimization, suffering of one's people, "feel-good" national narratives can be traced under human rights violations, but when it comes to things that are unpleasant for the ruling narratives about the state and the nation, the situation is completely different.



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There are, however, organizations, groups and civil society initiatives that work persistently and thoroughly on non-formal education with a large methodological and thematic coverage in this area, which does not automatically mean a better situation for the overall issue of human rights and positivist transitional justice. When there are initiatives implementing above mentioned activities, they face a lack of human and financial resources, exhaustion, closure of public space and institutions, various forms of demonization by official structures and hostility of the wider society. It should be added that even the few professional media often do not recognize the social significance of these topics and do not pay enough attention to them.

Quality education is achieved in different contexts by applying universal principles of historical, legal and political sciences to the specific conditions of a given context. As constant conflicts, scandals, the decline of general education, the rise of nationalism and populism, the state institutions under the control of foreign and domestic capital, especially in the countries of „the periphery“, show either occasional and partial or no objective interest in development and the application of such principles and approaches in dealing with the past, as well as the present and future of the majority of the population. So it remains for civil society organizations and initiatives to maintain the platforms and principles of engagement, information, enlightenment and objectivity necessary to deal with either the past, present or future situations from a specific context as well as the world as a whole. International bodies and institutions that are also under the influence of the political and ideological principles of the big economies, work in the interest of those, and can support processes of moral and political confrontation, responsibility and education on issues only as far as it is in the interest of the capital that controls them. Even that level of support is sometimes not to be underestimated and rejected, and the role of conscientious and responsible activists around the world is to constantly fight in such a situation for the affirmation of elementary scientifically established historical and current facts, transparent analyzes and true interpretations achieved by them. Only in this way can they achieve their purpose and open different horizons of expectations of local and global society from the existing ones, dictated and limited by profit interests, ecologically, ethically and existentially unacceptable realities and perspectives.

Recommendations

As for the recommendations coming from participants of survey and interviews for this case study, striking (and troubling) is that majority does not have nothing to recommend to government and educational councils, because „in Serbia it is a waste of time, due to the state itself systematically destroys institutions and endangers basic respect for the law“. One of the teachers only stated that her one recommendation for state and educational institutions to „first of all make questions that you raise in this survey become important to them too“.

For civil society organizations participants recommend:

- Develop a more complex approach that will not focus only on the perpetrators and victims, but will contribute to understanding the whole context of wars and their consequences today;
- Do thorough, well-methodologically based research on topics before formulating activities;
- Turn more to society, rather than exhausting the effort to force the state to pass or / respect its own laws;
- Closely connect in different ways with other organisations locally and regionaly and work together, because the past cannot be understood in the right way if it remains on the borders of today's state borders;
- Closer connections and exchanges with academic, artistic and media circles;
- Closer networking and exchange with other civil society organizations and groups that may not focus on these topics.

For international institutions suggestions are:

- Support closer networking of organizations and initiatives at the local, national and regional levels;
- Extend the time frame for financing projects and initiatives;
- Support research that is scientifically relevant and well methodologically based;
- Put pressure on state institutions to include these topics in their work.



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