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IS COLLECTIVE MEMORY MAKING THE NEXT BALKAN WAR IMMINENT?

By Nikola Knežević

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Sometimes cultures, religions, and ethnicities that shared the same space for centuries become fierce rivals, forcing their irreconcilable differences to develop to such an extent that they see war as the only option. The Balkans has had its share of conflicts, destruction, and atrocities leaving scars too deep to heal. The question is: have they seen the end of it, or will the frozen conflict lurking beneath the fragile peace unleash its deadly force again?

Whether due to the reluctance of local political leaders to leave the selective use of the past behind, the influence of Russian right-wing populism, the embrace of ethnic divisions as dominant rhetoric and policies, or the neglect of victims on the other side--with each day, the sum of all fears is that the new conflict is imminent and closing in fast.

There was a time when I was more optimistic about the future of the western Balkans: while as professor and president of NGO, I was engaged in regional peacekeeping initiatives, particularly those involving dominant religions in the process of transitional justice. The results,

however, were not promising, leaving the entire effort trapped inside irreconcilable differences or superficial and dishonest statements of political or religious officials.

The political climate is very unlikely to change for the better. Dysfunctional states and governments, economic distress, ethnic divisions, and corrupt political elites are leaving the population in discontent, distrust and strongly inclined towards right-wing agendas, or, at least, ones that have not already left the peninsula pursuing a better life with more security. The future seems very gloomy and filled with uncertainty for the ex-Yugoslav states.

Brief History of the Conflicts

The western Balkans is a complex equation with too many unknown variables, a ticking bomb that is ready to pop at any moment with the incomprehensible outcome. More than two decades have passed since the last armed conflict and yet, I have a strong sense that we are only getting further from the long-term political and economic stability so needed in ex-Yugoslavia. Hidden beneath the recently-born democracies that are still facing many issues, such as freedom of speech, human rights violations, and corruption, there is a problem far more sinister, a problem rooted deeply in the collective identities of ex-Yugoslav nations. Lingering political crisis and ethnic tensions between the former conflicting parties, the complex intertwining between dominant religions and politics, the meddling of foreign powers, and rising right-wing and religious fundamentalism are a few reasons why the Western Balkans should be among the priorities for U.S. foreign policy.

The economic distress, corruption, and the lack of long-term political stability have caused much of the younger population to leave their homes, providing the perfect environment for the success of right-wing populism, so favored among members of the ruling political elite.

Populist rhetoric has generally become more common in Eastern Europe. Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland are countries led by populist governments, regardless of their political compass, and the western Balkans is no exception. Only, there, such political romanticism, mingled with religious and right-wing extremism, proved to be a fatal combination, causing the bloodiest conflict since the Second World War.

There are more than a few lingering conflicts in ex-Yugoslavia, and they all have a common denominator, an ethnic or religious subtext. The ongoing crisis between Serbia and Kosovo (former southern province of Serbia) is almost a century-long ethnic struggle between Serb and Albanian populations, which resulted in armed conflict in 1998 and ethnic cleansing by Slobodan Milošević, the former Serbian president, who was charged later with war crimes. The war ended in 1999 with large-scale NATO air raids, led by the U.S. which lasted a few months and devastated the Serbian infrastructure and economy, and caused civilian casualties. Kosovo declared independence in 2008, but until this day, it remains a partially recognized state, struggling with corruption and crime, with a major dispute with Serbia and ethnic divisions between the north, populated by Serbs and the rest of the country with an Albanian majority. The Serbian Orthodox Church stands as a primary opposition to recognizing Kosovo independence opting for a frozen conflict. Serbs consider Kosovo as their Jerusalem, a "Holy Land," a specific focal point for Serbs as well as for the Serbian Orthodox Church, which still strongly inclines towards mythological narratives.

Bosnia and Herzegovina lacks political stability and is a dead-locked political governance that is still divided by thick boundary lines between Bošnjak, Croatian, and Serbian ethnicities. In addition to political disputes between Republika Srpska (Serbian entity) and the Federation (Federation of Bosnian and Croatian entity), there is a serious problem of extreme interpretation

of Islam and Wahhabism, mainly influenced by Saudi Arabia, which tends to endanger the mainstream and milder form of Islam, still dominant in Bosnia. Historical interpretations of the recent conflicts are largely contested by ruling elites, ethnicities, and religions that are reluctant to leave selective views behind. Many Bosnian Serbs, backed by a few prominent bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian politicians, are still in denial that crimes committed against the Bošnjak (Muslim) population in Srebrenica were an act of genocide. In addition to continuous threats by the Republika Srpska to declare independence, an ongoing political crisis is always just a few steps from a serious relapse into new armed conflict.

Finally, Croatia and Serbia, as former conflicting parties, are trapped in complex historical ethnic relations and interpretations. While Serbia fails to comply with the clear fact that aggression was orchestrated from Belgrade and officially recognize (and mark) the existence of detention camps on Serbian soil during the war, Croatia, with its closely intertwined relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the government, is sliding into the dangerous political romanticism of the Second World War, as Nazi collaborators are perceived as liberators and forerunners of Croatian independence. The city of Vukovar, the hallmark of the Croatian resistance to Serbian aggression, a besieged city that suffered the most during the war, depicts all the ambiguity, complexity, and absurdity of Serb-Croatian relations. Two decades after the war, local society is still very deeply segregated, forcing children of two ethnicities to attend school in different shifts, Serbs in the morning and Croats in the afternoon.

Institutionalized and Collective Memory as the Source of Divisions

Two decades after the war, the countries of the former Yugoslavia are still functioning as societies of “frozen conflicts,” full of religious and nationalist narratives about the threats of

‘others.’ Rather than as a reconciliatory memory or shared narrative, the past is often used trans-generationally to instill hatred against a constructed enemy. Past conflicts thus become ‘frozen,’ paralyzing the present, and making the future very uncertain. The unhealed collective trauma of war is thus transmitted and perpetuated to future generations, evoking intolerance, and the repetition of violence, exclusivism, and radical nationalism.

The conflicts in the former Yugoslavia were essentially of a political nature, yet they had a strong religious subtext where religions played a significant role in the creation of ethnic divisions and manipulation of memory, in the sense of raising religious and national awareness, and therefore served as conflict catalyst. Possibly, one of the pivotal common denominators is trans-generational remembrance articulated by the political and religious elites. Antagonism between the dominant religions in the Balkans is not rooted in dogmatic or theological differences, but rather in the religious imagination of the political, politicized religion and theological articulation of trans-generational remembrance, consequently being transformed into a public narrative and social memory, sometimes deeply antagonized by religious or political factors. Therefore, dominant religions, instead of being the institutions of “collective memory,”¹ are playing the role of medium, or even “guardians” of (collective) trans-generational remembrance, lately referred to also as “postmemory”² (Hirsch, 2012). Such narrative or role-playing, after being politically manipulated into a “friend-foe” matrix, has strong conflict capacity by forming “post-believers” who view the “other” through the specific post-conflict construction of remembrance, which is sustaining ethnic tensions, religious extremism, and

¹ Johann Baptist Metz . *Memoria Passionis*, (Zagreb: Kršćanska Sadašnjost, 2009).

² Marianne Hirsch. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

intolerance. Consequently, contemporary politics is "encompassed by religious imagination," while "social and political struggles have been drawn into the realm of cosmic drama."³

Another very important issue is the institutional memory dominant in the Western Balkans states. It is the kind of remembrance that is rather selective, ideologically biased and exclusive, focusing on institutional forgetting of the facts. Consequently, the western Balkan governments are stressing the particular dates that stand as symbols of victory for independence against aggressors, while the critical dimension of such memory remains out of focus, or fully neglected by the political or religious elites. This is closely related to institutional identity divisions that occur "when the states label people according to ethnic, religious, or other objective criteria, and then apportion benefits based upon these labels."⁴

Examples of such institutional memory framing are "Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day and the Day of Croatian Defenders," celebrated on August 5 as one of the most important governmental events. While this event represents a hallmark of victory for Croats, the same is seen as the day of mourning for Serbs since the final outcome of the operation "Storm" was the expulsion of more than 200,000 Serbs from their homes. Another conflictual date is July 11. For Bosnian people, Srebrenica is the pivotal memory and climax of their suffering during the armed conflict; meanwhile, Serbs are commemorating the victims slain in Kravice by the Bosnian Army. While the Serbian Parliament adopted a declaration on March 31, 2010 condemning the crime in Srebrenica, to this day, the government remains reluctant to declare July 11 as the day of remembrance. Over the past decades, major symbols of collective remembrance have emerged: "Bleiburg," as a symbol of the suffering of the "Croatian army" (Nazi collaborators who took part in the most horrific atrocities in World War II, during the rule

³ Mark Juergensmeyer, "Religious Violence", in Clarke, Peter, (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, (Oxford Handbooks Online, 2009), 891.

⁴ Robert E. Hamilton, "Keep your eye on the Balkans", <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/03/keep-eye-balkans/>

of the Independent State of Croatia) and the oppression of the communist regime, and Jasenovac, as a symbol of Serbian suffering and often used by the Milošević and satellite governments in Krajina and the Serbian Orthodox Church prior to and during the conflict to demonize the newly-elected government in Croatia and present them as a newly established and resurrected ustaša Independent State.

These narratives are standing today as hallmarks of a collective memory of the western Balkans nations, which are reluctant to abandon such attitudes by empowering strong ethno-political narratives influencing public life, leaving divisions and thick "boundary lines" intact, keeping the Balkan peninsula trapped in the complex intertwining of ethnonationalism, religion, and politics. Such a political climate makes peace and stability almost unreachable, the future of the ex-Yugoslav states in murky waters, and the possibility of armed conflict not a very remote prospect.

Not many scholars agree that a conflict renewal is a distant possibility, stating that the political crisis, identity divisions merged with economic distress, the increasing influence of Russia, and the clear fact that the western Balkans is one large unfinished reconciliation project.

Colonel Robert Hamilton asserts that the West "should pay greater attention" to the western Balkans in order to "avoid the renewal of the conflict," especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina where the "post-Dayton constitution institutionalizes identity divisions among Bosnia-Herzegovina's people, in much the same way that the Yugoslav constitution did." He further asserts that:

the post-Dayton political structure—never meant to be a permanent fixture—has further divided and institutionalized three separate identities among the country's citizens; this structure has provided ample fuel for a violent separatist conflict. The spark could come from a number of sources: contested elections, ethnic or religiously motivated violence, or an economic crisis are but three of several imaginable possibilities. Once a separatist

conflict begins, whether it escalates to all-out war depends in great part on the role played by external actors.⁵

Timothy Less warns about possible consequences of losing the EU dominance over the Balkans:

As the EU loses its dominance in the Balkans, so the region's unresolved nationalisms are returning to the surface on a bed of popular discontent. The Balkans have the potential to blow their problems back into Europe, entangling the EU in a new, potentially violent regional crisis. This may not happen tomorrow but, as the EU's influence wanes, the day of reckoning draws ever closer. “⁶

With the collective memory constituting of deeply intertwined institutional nationalisms fostered by the ex-Yugoslav states—the kind of remembrance that is rather selective, ideologically biased, exclusive, and focusing on institutional forgetting of the facts—the political climate and peace prospects in the Western Balkans are very unlikely to change for the better, but perhaps for the worse, emerging into a possible armed conflict that would lead already fragile EU at the brink of new humanitarian and political crisis.

⁵ Robert E. Hamilton, “Keep your eye on the Balkans”, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/03/keep-eye-balkans/>

⁶ Timothy Less, “The next Balkan wars”, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/2016/06/next-balkan-wars>