The Past Is Not Yet Over: Remembrance, Justice and Security Community in the Western Balkans

JELENA SUBOTIC*
Georgia State University, USA

Abstract: Twenty years since the onset of the wars of Yugoslav secession, the countries of the Western Balkans continue to nurture narratives of the past that are mutually exclusive, contradictory, and irreconcilable. In this essay, I argue that there is a direct link between ways in which different states remember their pasts and obstacles to the building of long-term regional security community in the region. I propose that remembrance of the past and historical justice for past wrongs shape choices policymakers make, by making some options seem unimaginable, while others inevitable. The power that narratives of past violence and injustice hold on policymakers is particularly significant as the region advances toward European integration. The efforts to "clean up" the past – through education reform and memorialization projects – should not be thought of as secondary initiatives, but as critically needed steps in pursuit of regional stability based on sustainable security community.[1]

Keywords: security community; remembrance; justice; Western Balkans

Introduction

On his very first day in office in June 2012, the newly elected Serbian president Tomislav Nikolić said that no genocide took place in Srebrenica, and that, in any case, genocide was "difficult to prove in court."[2]In response, Bosnian Presidency Chairman Bakir Izetbegović responded that Nikolić's statement was "untrue and offensive for Bosniacs, especially for the survivors of Srebrenica genocide."[3] But this was not Nikolić's first entry into historical justice debates. Few months earlier, he declared that a "greater Serbia was [his] unrealized dream" and that "Vukovar was a Serbian town to which Croats should not return."[4] While he quickly backtracked, his original statement caused consternation in Croatia and was

---

1   Some of the material in this article appears, in a different form, in (Subotic 2012).

2   B92, June 1, 2012.

3   Ibid.

4   *Balkan Insight*, May 28, 2012.

* *jsubotic@gsu.edu*

the subject of much debate on Croatian TV, including a firm response from Croatian president Ivo Josipović.[5]

The past in the Western Balkans, therefore, is not yet over. In fact, to paraphrase Faulkner, it is not even the past. Twenty years since the start of the Yugoslav wars, the countries of the region are stuck in public narratives of the past that are mutually exclusive, contradictory, and irreconcilable. Remembrance of the past and historical justice for past wrongs shape choices policymakers make, by making some options unimaginable, while others inevitable. This is why efforts to "clean up" the past – through education reform, memorialization projects, and commissions of inquiry – should not be secondary initiatives, but critically needed steps in pursuit of regional security based on trust, respect, and dignity.

Security Communities in International Politics

The concept of a "security community" in international relations goes back to Karl Deutsch, who defined it as a group with a sense of community and institutions and practices that guarantee peace among its members.[6] Deutsch's concept was resurrected by Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett who looked at ways in which states form security alliances based on shared understanding of norms, values, and trust, and not only calculations of strategic interest.[7]

Central to the concept of security community is the community feeling, which exists among members who share identities, values, and meanings, have multiple mutual relationships, and exhibit a sense of obligation and responsibility toward one another. The principal variables of the social construction of security communities, therefore, are intersubjective, collective representations that members are willing to share about themselves. Being a member of the community is determined not only by the state's international identity, but also by its domestic behaviors and practices.

Out of this research program, further theoretical specifications arose that explain what, exactly, is needed for states to create a security community. Thomas Risse suggested a tripartite model: shared collective identity; stable interdependent interstate interactions; and strong institutionalizations of relations between states.[8] This "thick" security community position makes a strong causal claim that state integration leads to the feeling of community, which in turn, leads to security.[9]

---

5   Ibid.

6   Deutsch 1957.

7   Adler and Barnett 1998.

8   Risse 2004.

9   Emmerson 2005.

To defend itself from realist charges of idealism, security community scholars further specified that what makes a security community is not the absence of any conflict among its members, but instead the resolution of such conflicts through peaceful means.[10] In other words, security community can be said to exist when diplomacy – not violence – becomes the obvious choice of leaders in solving disputes. This is why recent research in the security community framework has relaxed the assumption of collective identity as necessary for security, and allowed for states that do not share the "we-feeling" to still build trust that would make violence unfathomable.[11] This "practice" turn in the study of security communities is welcome and more empirically grounded. In what follows, I contribute to this scholarship by expanding the repertoire of state practices that are necessary for the development of a sustainable security community, by focusing on state remembrance of past violence.

Remembrance, Justice, and Security Community

An important insight from the security community framework is that state identities are formed in relationship to other states, and that they depend on state interaction with others in the international system. It is the quality and depth of these interactions that is important, therefore, not only its frequency. This is significant because it indicates that security communities are not "found" or identified as such – they are actively created through social learning, socialization, persuasion, and institutionalization of intersubjective norms.

Adler and Barnett have already suggested that one way of researching shared identities is by looking at state narratives. These stories states tell about their pasts have multiple implications for their contemporary policies.[12] We know that particular remembrance of past conflicts can cause misperceptions and increase threat perceptions between states. Denials about past atrocities create fear and distrust among former enemies. States that deny past violence appear hostile and threatening; those that admit past wrongdoing and apologize appear benevolent.[13] Collective memories of past trauma can help explain causes of conflict, as well as its intractability.[14] A particularly sinister interpretation of past events matters when popular historical beliefs are distorted in ways that glorify one's nation at the expense of others, a practice that can lead to perverse understanding of national interests and open the domestic discursive space to justify conflict.[15] Further, states over time develop particular "national security cultures," which are partly constructed by

---

10   Pouliot 2006.

11   Pouliot 2007.

12   He 2009, Langenbacher and Shain 2010, Müller 2002, Zarakol 2010.

13   Lind 2008.

14   Long and Brecke 2003, Wittes 2005.

15   Mendeloff 2008.

national mythmaking about shared pasts and historical enemies.[16] Political actors then use collective remembrance of state's past to justify going to war to skeptical or ambivalent domestic publics, and can lead states into further violence.[17]

In such discursive environments, it is exceedingly difficult to build sustainable peace after a history of extreme violence between former enemies. Mistrust, doubt, and threat perception are high, intensity of inter-state communication low, the "we-feeling" nonexistent. Where the traditional security perspective would focus on changing threat perceptions and maximizing incentives for peace (including, for example, renewed emphasis on inter-state trade and other kinds of material benefits), the security community framework would stress narrative changes, communicative and rhetorical persuasion, and discursive community reconstruction.

While my arguments rests on the premise that some form of shared identity and intersubjective understanding is necessary for the creation of a security community, this does not mean that states and nations have to think of themselves as the same or interchangeable, or to completely subsume their identities onto one another. What is important for the building of a security community, however, is a commitment to manage disagreements peacefully, and to become communities of practice where hostility, mistrust, and intolerance cease to be legitimate forms of interstate behavior.

A particularly important element of community building is dealing with the mutually exclusive social needs for justice for past wrongs. Far from being only an administrative afterthought, systematic addressing of justice claims is essential for the construction of intersubjective understanding, the basis of a sustainable security community. Postconflict communities will not overcome distrust and feeling of insecurity until there is a mutually compatible, understood, and respected process of justice (acknowledgment of past wrongs, punishment of perpetrators, apologies of states, and restitution for victims). Justice is important for a state's ontological security, for its sense of self, for its self-esteem. It is important for other states to recognize the "perpetrator" state has made amends, has expressed regret, has punished those responsible. Justice, therefore, is not an element of security; it is its foundational bloc. In the next section, I evaluate recent efforts at state remembrance of the past in the Western Balkans as preconditions for the construction of a sustainable security community in the region.

Remembering the Past in the Western Balkans

There are few better ways to reconstruct state remembrance of its past than analyzing history textbooks. History textbooks embody "lowest common denominator" history, a

---

16   Katzenstein 1996, Welch 2002, Berger 1998.

17   Van Evera 1994, Krebs and Lobasz 2007.

version of popular history and public memory that appeals to the broad national audience.[18] History textbooks are important barometers of public remembrance because they are explicitly designed to inculcate particular views of the past into future generations.[19]

The problem with history education in the Western Balkans, however, is that region's histories are multiple, contradictory, and mutually exclusive. Far from being a tool for social cohesion and security community building, they continue to be instruments of political othering, alienation, ethnification, and community destruction.

Serbia

While the language is cleaned up and some of the outrageous hate speech and rhetoric from the 1990s textbooks eliminated, contemporary Serbian textbooks continue with the fundamental narrative about the country's past. The Serbian nation is still represented as a victim of selfish separatists in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia, the narrative that frames the understanding of Serbian war crimes: victims of atrocities cannot be perpetrators themselves. This is the remembrance of the past that helps explain Serbia's continuing reluctance to deal with war crimes of the past in any meaningful way.

This state effort at keeping silence about Serbian criminal past has been largely successful. Surveys consistently show that the public mostly refuses to believe that Serbs had committed war crimes, and Serbs blame other nations and ethnic groups for starting the wars. In a recent survey, only 34 percent of the respondents correctly identified the victims of Srebrenica as Bosniacs, and only 10 percent acknowledged that Croats, not Serbs, were killed in a major massacre in Ovčara, Croatia in 1991.[20]

In terms of official recognition of crimes of the past, Serbia has made a few contradictory moves. In March 2010, the Parliament adopted the *Declaration on Srebrenica*, which, while acknowledging the massacre, remains a very problematic document. The word "genocide" never appears in the text, which is significant because the crime of all crimes is reduced to a nondescript "crime against population." This rhetorical ploy is an example of "interpretive denial," where crimes of the past are not denied as outright lies, but are interpreted in a manner that changes the past and gives past events a very different meaning.[21]

Further, the *Declaration* never mentions who was responsible for this atrocity, what was the role of the Serbian state, or how did the massacre come about. Instead, the *Declaration*

---

18   Mendeloff 2008.

19   Witness, for example, the recent discussion of the impact on history textbooks in "shaping national attitudes" in *The Economist*, October 13, 2012.

20   Manojlović Pintar 2010, 97.

21   Cohen 2001.

apologizes "for the failure to prevent the tragedy." This is quite a cynical interpretation of the role of the Serbian state in the massacre – as much evidence collected during ICTY trials (specifically *ICTY vs. Radoslav Krstić* and *ICTY vs. Slobodan Milošević*) demonstrated, the Serbian state was instrumental in arming Bosnian Serb troops, providing logistical support and approving the Bosnian Serb masterplan in Srebrenica. The *Declaration*, therefore, represents a missed opportunity for the Serbian government to make a clean break and deconstruct the hegemonic remembrance of Serbia's past. Instead, it is another example of how entrenched is the view of Serbian role in the region, its behavior in the recent wars, and its expectations of exoneration from others.

Croatia

The central premise of Croatia's history education is that, "Croats never fought aggressive, but only defensive wars."[22] This view organizes the historical interpretation of Croatia's Homeland War of the 1990s, which is taught exclusively as the consequence of Serbian aggression and terrorism, without a broader context of Yugoslav succession. Most textbooks discuss at length Serbian crimes against Croatian civilians, but only one textbook even mentions that thousands of Serbs were forced to leave Croatia in 1995 in the aftermath of Operation Storm.[23]

Many of the books in circulation still use extreme nationalist language and concepts, not much reformed since the early 1990s. The fascist Independent State of Croatia is often glorified, crimes of the ustasha regime marginalized or avoided. In fact, during a public debate over modernizing Croatian history textbooks, the establishment historians offered this bold statement: "history textbooks must take into consideration not only scientific and pedagogic standards, but also national and state criteria."[24] It is hard to find more direct evidence of the role history education plays in nation building projects than this attitude of the Croatian intellectual elite.

The Croatian Parliament had also directly legislated the memory of the war in Croatia and passed laws on how this event is to be commemorated, understood, and interpreted. Members of Parliament floated various proposals for how to appropriately memorialize the war, which ranged from the *Declaration on Fundamental Values of the Homeland War* to criticisms of Croatian contemporary artists for "failing to create works of art worthy of this magnificent event."[25] The Parliament adopted the *Declaration on the Homeland War* in 2000, which requests from "all officials and official organs of the Republic of Croatia to protect the fundamental values and dignity of the Homeland War,"[26] which effectively

---

22　Agičić and Najbar-Agičić 2007, 204.

23　Ibid.

24　Agičić 2011, 362.

25　Koren 2011, 135.

26　Croatian Parliament 2000.

discouraged any discussion of Croatian war crimes. The *Declaration* quite explicitly states that Croatia "led a just and legitimate, defensive and liberating, and not aggressive nor occupying war against anyone."[27] In 2006, the Parliament adopted another declaration, this time specifically legislating the memory of Operation Storm. The *Declaration on Operation Storm* requests from "the Croatian Parliament, Croatian scientific community, Croatian institutions of science and education, as well as media, to over time turn Operation Storm into a battle that will become part of Croatia's 'useful past' for its future generations."[28] This is quite a remarkable example of direct state construction of collective memory. The interpretation of the past, therefore, has been made official and is not subject to further contestation and reinterpretation.

The way in which the recent (and distant) past is remembered makes state narratives in Croatia and Serbia incompatible. Croatia remembers Operation Storm as the pinnacle of its fight for independence, an event that made the contemporary Croatian state possible. Serbia remembers Operation Storm as a site of Serbian defeat, and a site of ethnic cleansing of Serb civilians. For the Croatian narrative, this criminalization of Operation Storm is inconceivable, because it criminalizes the Croatian state itself. The November 2012 ICTY acquittal of Croatian generals Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markač for alleged war crimes committed in the aftermath of Operation Storm has produced further entrenchment of mutually contradictory public narratives about the nature of the Croatian war and its larger historical meaning. The two narratives therefore continue to be stories of exclusion and separation; these are not stories that build a sense of community.

Bosnia

In Bosnia, history has developed an "ethnicity" of its own. Like everything else in postwar Bosnia, education represents ethnic politics of the majority population in a particular region. Attempts at centralizing education have largely failed, a consequence of the Dayton political architecture that locked ethnic politics in its place and made two major Bosnian political entities into quasi-states.[29]

This ethnification of education created the environment in which history narratives in Bosnia are not only incompatible to those in Serbia and Croatia, but the three versions of the Bosnian past (Serbian, Croatian, and Bosniac) are incompatible with one another. Bosnian students still use three very different sets of history textbooks: *Historija* for the Bosniac students printed in Sarajevo, *Povijest* for the Croatian students and imported from Croatia, *Istorija* for the Serbian students published in Belgrade, with an additional *Supplement* written specifically for the Republika Srpska entity.[30] This absurd arrangement

---

27   Ibid.

28   Croatian Parliament 2006.

29   Perry forthcoming, McMahon and Western 2009.

30   Torsti forthcoming.

results in the fact that only the "Bosniac" textbook reflects the history of Bosnia in any systematic way, while the Croatian and Serbian versions refer to Croatia and Serbia, respectively, as ethnic "homelands" and mostly build on Croatian and Serbian state narratives, different from, and mostly opposed to, the narrative of the unitary Bosnian state.

The way in which history is presented, interpreted, and understood in Bosnia then clearly led to further ethnic division and politicization of the past. Bosnian political straightjacket influenced history education, but history education also further perpetuated the political status quo – the persistence of ethnic difference, the weak efforts at reconciliation, the victimization of one's own group and the complete absence of acknowledgment of the suffering of others.

Conclusion

This essay provided snapshots of contemporary state practices of remembrance in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia, and made an argument for why these conflicting identities continue to be barriers to building a sustainable, viable security community in the region. This pessimism, however, does not mean that nothing should be done. Quite the opposite, much needs to be done. There are multiple available mechanisms of dealing with the past that have yet to be systematically implemented in the region.

All three states should accept an official regional commission of inquiry into past atrocities, as well as commit to broadly disseminate the results of the commission and implement its recommendations into state policy. The ongoing REKOM initiative has that potential but it will not accomplish enough without official recognition by regional governments – a key piece that is still missing.[31]

Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia should also implement comprehensive education reform, which includes textbook and curriculum reform that clearly presents evidence of crimes committed, the nature of the conflict, and the political environment that made the atrocities possible and even popular among wide segments of society.[32] Serbia and Croatia especially should create national days of memory for victims of atrocities their own troops have committed, and set up museums or similar memorial sites to remember victims and survivors.

---

31   For more information on REKOM, see www.zarekom.org.

32   A promising regional Joint History Project initiative did produce alternative history textbook supplements (see http://www.cdsee.org/projects/jhp). However, very few teachers in the region have adopted them, primarily because the state control of the textbook industry makes reform incredibly hard to initiate and maintain. History teachers, therefore, see no clear benefit to them of adopting textbook supplements that are not sanctioned or approved by the state.

These memorialization efforts are important in their own right, but they are a necessary component of security community building. Security communities are built on trust, understanding, and a shared political culture that makes further violence unimaginable. The states of the Western Balkans are far from this sense of community, but revisiting how they remember their pasts is a key starting point.

References

Adler, Emanuel, and Michael N. Barnett. 1998. *Security Communities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Agičić, Damir. 2011. "Prikaz postanka suvremene Republike Hrvatske u hrvatskim udžbenicima." In *Kultura sjećanja: 1991. - Povijesni lomovi i svladavanje prošlosti*, edited by Tihomir Cipek. Zagreb: Disput.

Agičić, Damir, and Magdalena Najbar-Agičić. 2007. "History Teaching in 1990s Croatia." In *Democratic Transition in Croatia: Value Transformation, Education & Media*, edited by Sabrina P. Ramet and Davorka Matić. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.

Berger, Thomas U. 1998. *Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Cohen, Stanley. 2001. *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering.* Cambridge, Eng.: Polity.

Croatian Parliament. 2000. Deklaracija o domovinskom ratu [Declaration on the Homeland War]. Zagreb: Narodne novine.

Croatian Parliament. 2006. Deklaracija o Oluji [Declaration on Operation Storm]. Zagreb: Narodne novine.

Deutsch, Karl W. 1957. *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Emmerson, Donald K. 2005. "Security, Community, and Democracy in Southeast Asia: Analyzing ASEAN." *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 6 (2):165–185. doi: doi:10.1017/S1468109905001829.

He, Yinan. 2009. *The Search for Reconciliation: Sino-Japanese and German-Polish Relations since World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Katzenstein, Peter J. 1996. *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Koren, Snježana. 2011. "Korisna prošlost?" In *Kultura sjećanja: 1991. – Povijesni lomovi i svladavanje prošlosti*, edited by Tihomir Cipek. Zagreb: Disput.

Krebs, Ronald R., and Jennifer K. Lobasz. 2007. "Fixing the Meaning of 9/11: Hegemony, Coercion, and the Road to War in Iraq." *Security Studies* 16 (3):409–451. doi: 10.1080/09636410701547881.

Langenbacher, Eric, and Yossi Shain. 2010. *Power and the Past: Collective Memory and International Relations*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Lind, Jennifer. 2008. *Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics, Cornell studies in security affairs*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Long, William J., and Peter Brecke. 2003. *War and Reconciliation: Reason and Emotion in Conflict Resolution*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Manojlović Pintar, Olga. 2010. "Rat i nemir." In *Novosti iz prošlosti: Znanje, neznanje, upotreba i zloupotreba istorije*, edited by Dubravka Stojanović, Radina Vučetić, Sanja Petrović Todosijević, Olga Manojlović Pintar and Radmila Radić. Belgrade: Belgrade Center for Human Rights.

McMahon, Patrice C., and Jon Western. 2009. The Death of Dayton. *Foreign Affairs*, August 17.

Mendeloff, David. 2008. "'Pernicious History' as a Cause of National Misperceptions." *Cooperation and Conflict* no. 43 (1):31–56.

Müller, Jan-Werner. 2002. *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Perry, Valery. forthcoming. "Classrooms as a Battleground for Hearts and Minds: Efforts to Reform and Transform Education in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina." In *Civic and Uncivic Values in Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Record Since Dayton*, edited by Ola Listhaug and Sabrina P. Ramet. Ravenna: Longo Editore.

Pouliot, Vincent. 2006. "The Alive and Well Transatlantic Security Community: A Theoretical Reply to Michael Cox." *European Journal of International Relations* 12 (1):119–127. doi: 10.1177/1354066106061332.

Pouliot, Vincent. 2007. "Pacification Without Collective Identification: Russia and the Transatlantic Security Community in the Post-Cold War Era." *Journal of Peace Research* 44 (5):605–622. doi: 10.1177/0022343307080858.

Risse, Thomas. 2004. "Beyond Iraq: The Crisis of the Transatlantic Security Community." In *American Power in the 21st Century*, edited by David Held and Mathias Koenig-Archibugi, 214–240. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Subotic, Jelena. 2012. *Remembrance, Public Narratives, and Obstacles to Justice in the Western Balkans.* Atlanta: Georgia State University (forthcoming).

Torsti, Pilvi. forthcoming. "Rival Histories & Textbook Reform in Bosnian Textbooks 1992–2009." In *Civic and Uncivic Values in Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Record Since Dayton*, edited by Ola Listhaug and Sabrina P. Ramet. Ravenna: Longo Editore.

Van Evera, Stephen. 1994. "Hypotheses on Nationalism and War." *International Security* 18(4):5–39.

Welch, David. 2002. "Culture and Emotion as Obstacles to Good Judgment: The Case of Argentina's Invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas." In *Good Judgment in Foreign Policy: Theory and Application*, edited by Stanley A. Renshon and Deborah Welch Larson, 191–215. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Wittes, Tamara Cofman. 2005. *How Israelis and Palestinians Negotiate: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Oslo Peace Process.* Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press.

Zarakol, Ayse. 2010. "Ontological (In)security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan." *International Relations* 24 (1):3–23. doi: 10.1177/0047117809359040.