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The Permanent Interim: Bosnia and Herzegovina's Ongoing Educational Crisis

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VALERY PERRY, OCT 12 2014

While significant efforts and funds have been poured into the educational systems of post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) [1] on both basic reconstruction and policy development, the schools, textbooks, and curricula remain unreformed in terms of both methodology and the nature of divisive ethno-national content. Schools remain largely divided, with the notion of “in groups” and “out groups” cultivated from the earliest grades. A period of reform activity from 2001-2005 began to address some of the most egregious problems. However, since then – and parallel to a broader decline in post-war peace and state-building – there have been few systemic improvements, and interim measures aimed at alleviating the worst symptoms of discriminations have become frozen into the barren policy landscape. The education of young people in such an environment bodes poorly for the economy of BiH, and makes meaningful conflict resolution a distant prospect. This article provides a brief overview of the status of education and education policy in BiH as a new school year has begun, with the same old politics. [2]

Background – How Did We Get Here?

It is useful to begin with a short review of how BiH came to a point where it has an entrenched system of separate, ethnically-flavored education systems waging identity war in the classroom.

When Yugoslavia began to fall apart in the early 1990s, the potential impact on Bosnia was an immediate concern to Balkan watchers. How would rising ethno-nationalism affect the most diverse and inter-mingled population in Yugoslavia, and how would the country's social fabric either weather the political storms or be violently unraveled? Following the secession of Slovenia and Croatia, and on the heels of violent separatism and war in Croatia, it became clear that Bosnia's disentanglement would be bloody (Sells 1998; Silber and Little 1996; Burg and Shoup 1999). The war in Bosnia began in 1992, following a pattern of declaration of “Serbian autonomous republics” in Croatia. In Bosnia this took the form of the declaration of the “Republika Srpska” by BiH Serb politicians in January 1992, and a referendum on Bosnia's independence from Yugoslavia. On April 6, 1992, peace protests in Sarajevo were disbursed with gunfire from Serb forces, and soon the former Olympic city was besieged by the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) and irregulars in what would become the longest military siege in modern history (Andreas). Paramilitary operations in the eastern part of the country bordering Serbia quickly changed the facts on the ground, with the early killing or expulsion of non-Serb (primarily Bosnian Muslim) populations altering centuries-old demographic patterns. Serb fighters enjoyed a significant advantage, having inherited weapons and ammunition from the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA); an advantage cemented by the arms blockade imposed on the region in an ill-considered effort to reduce the bloodshed.

For three-and-a-half years, the world watched the war unfold on still-new 24-hour news networks. Broadly speaking, the war was fought among Bosnia's Muslims (Bosniaks), Catholics (Croats), and Orthodox (Serbs), though many persons of mixed or undeclared background fought in and were impacted by the war. There was a regional dimension as some factions and political leaders sought partition of the country, with possible annexation to what remained of Yugoslavia or Croatia. After years of failed diplomatic efforts, a military offensive in Croatia and NATO airstrikes on Serb positions in Bosnia forced the warring parties to the negotiating table one more time (Burg and Shoup 1999; Holbrooke 1999). The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina (GFAP, or

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the Dayton Agreement) was aggressively pushed by the US and reluctantly agreed to by representatives from Bosnia, Croatia, and Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio. After the deaths of approximately 100,000 people, and the displacement of almost half of the population (Toal and Dahlman 2011), BiH retained its international borders.

The internal picture was very different, however, with the country's new constitutional and governance structure reflecting the impact of the war. Post-war BiH was fragmented and devolved, consisting of two entities – the decentralized Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH, or the “Muslim-Croat Federation”) making up 51% of the territory, and the centralized Republika Srpska (RS) making up 49%. The Federation is further broken down into ten cantons, which enjoy the bulk of governing competencies and related finances. (Five of these cantons have Bosniak majorities, [3] three have Croat majorities, [4] and two are mixed). [5] There was a significant international military operation in BiH to enforce the military aspects of the peace, and a large civilian peace implementation mission that reached the peak of its engagement from 1997-2005. Dayton ended the war, but two decades later it is difficult to argue that the country has experienced any meaningful political reconciliation or democratic consolidation, and since 2006 there has been a notable deterioration in the political environment (McMahon and Western 2009; Bassuener and Weber 2013; Perry 2015; Sebastian 2011). At its most basic, Serb leaders seek maximal autonomy from the state (often threatening a referendum on secession (Toal 2013)), Croat politicians seek to increase their own position through their own entity or entity-like arrangement, and Bosniak politicians seek stronger state and weaker entity powers to try to compensate for the disproportionate impact the war had on Bosniak civilians (Sito-Sutic 2013); the country's “others,” including citizens of mixed, undeclared, or civic identity, remain marginalized. These are the very same issues that were at the forefront of political debates in 1991 and 1992, when war erupted. In many ways, the conflict has simply been “frozen,” with the divided and divisive education system both a cause and symptom of the lingering dysfunction and non-existent conflict resolution.

Divided Policies, Schools, and Students

BiH has no state-level Ministry of Education (MoE), and all practical decision-making powers are held by the RS or, in the case of the Federation, by the cantons. [6] The result is a thoroughly ethnified structure, as the Serbs dictate education policy in their entity, while the Bosniaks and Croats do so in cantons in which they enjoy a clear majority. (The two mixed cantons experience fragmentation at lower levels, and continue to most visibly exhibit the dysfunction inherent in the system). A country with fewer than 4 million people has 12 education ministries (one in each entity, and one in each canton), and an Education Department in the District of Brcko. (On top of this heavy structure, there are additional coordination mechanisms as explained below.) Since the war, there have been many studies and reports that have elaborated on the impact of the war on education, and on the challenges in the post-war system; the problems have been well known from the start (Perry 2013; 2003).

The result is the thorough politicization of the educational system, which impacts both what children learn and how they learn it. Curricular content varies depending on the entity or canton in question, with nearly every school exhibiting a dominant ethnic “flavor” depending on whether it is predominantly Bosniak, Croat, or Serb (Bowder and Perry 2013). [7] These curricula emerged during the war, and have been consolidated as wartime and post-war homogenization has been entrenched. The impact of these differences stretches across all subjects; while topics such as math are clearly more objective than sensitive identity-focused topics, there remain differences in terms of when students learn certain topics (which can vary grade to grade), which has an impact on both mobility and state-wide assessment of learning outcomes. While there is a “Common Core Curriculum,” this term title is misleading, as this was developed not through the establishment of shared learning outcomes, but was an exercise (resulting from international pressure) in which education officials identified similar content already being taught, subsequently labeling that as the common core. [8]

From 1999-2005 (a generally aggressive period of peace implementation), international engagement on the issue was fairly high, and education even became a priority reform when other pressing concerns did not take precedence. Beginning in 1999, the international community intensified its support for the returns process, to ensure refugees and internally displaced persons could enjoy their rights under Annex 7 of the Dayton Agreement to return to their pre-war homes. However, while the physical property return process made progress, *sustainable* return was hampered by

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real-life challenges including access to employment, public/social services, and education. It was increasingly difficult for the international community to encourage return when the parents of returning children had a valid complaint that the schools to which they were returning were very often hostile to their group, teaching victim-aggressor narratives at odds with the various communities and creating an overall uncomfortable environment incompatible with return, let alone reconciliation. The recognition that being able to send one's children to school is a non-negotiable part of return led to the international community's increased involvement.

A number of institutional reforms were made in this period, and the state assumed some limited (though ultimately unenforceable) competencies. For example, the BiH Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA) developed a small education portfolio, and the Conference of Ministers of Education (modeled on a Swiss body of the same name) was established to allow (in theory) for the country's many Ministers of Education to coordinate and cooperate. A state-level Education Agency was established to set basic curricular standards based on learning outcomes. However, in the absence of the political will to make such bodies work, not one of these bodies are truly independent, all suffer a lack of resources and, most importantly, enforcement power.

There were also efforts to address some of the more divisive elements of the curricula, most notably in terms of the content of history textbooks (Torsti 2013). Basic civic education was introduced, and there were attempts to complement religious instruction with a more scholarly and less dogmatic approach to teaching about religions from a socio-cultural standpoint. However, in terms of curricular reform, these efforts tinkered at the edges, leaving the most egregious problems of ethno-national content and division intact, with repercussions that reverberate to this day. The so-called two-schools-under-one-roof (2 in 1s), and the national group of subjects (NGS) debate, are prime examples of how interim solutions aimed at contributing to a long-term process of reform instead froze divisions in place while the bigger structural problems were avoided and neglected. Both examples show the impact of an unreformed curricular framework: the 2 in 1s illustrate the impact of half measures taken in the Federation, and the NGS mainly in the RS. [9]

The 2 in 1s began as an effort to ensure access of returnee children to classrooms, as there were cases in starkly divided communities (such as Stolac, Vitez, and others) where Bosniak students were deterred from using public school buildings by the very clear pro-Croat symbols, school names, curricular materials etc. As a result, these students were studying in ad hoc "schools" in cafes or other non-suitable sites. Ironically, these cases have sprung up in places where communities were not fully homogenized, and where there is sufficient heterogeneity to lead to such a situation in the first place. In these communities, it was considered to be better in the short-term to have two schools in the same building (one using the Croat, and one the Bosniak curriculum), than having completely separate schools. The 2 in 1 approach was envisioned as a first step, with administrative unification following, and (ideally) more systematic curricular reform. However, instead this stopgap measure has lingered, and as a visible sign of division has unhelpfully created the misconception among some observers that BiH's educational problems would go away if these 50-odd schools would just go away. However, this is far from the only problem in the country, as various manifestations of segregation, discrimination and assimilation happen in every one of the country's schools.

The existence of the national group of subjects is another example of an interim measure put in place to mitigate the effects of three ethnically distinct curricula. The 2002 *Interim Agreement on Accommodation of the Rights and Needs of Returnee Children* sought to establish initial benchmarks for ensuring a more inclusive and tolerant environment for all students, but particularly for those students returning to communities where they would be in a minority vis a vis the new post-war population. The basic thrust of the *Interim Agreement* was that authorities at all levels should make an effort to ensure that returnee needs in schools were accommodated. This included the possibility of the introduction of the so-called national group of subjects (identity-centered topics including mother tongue, history, religion, geography, and music-culture) as an option for minority students in schools in which those identity-centered topics were different from the content of the curriculum being taught. This was operationalized in the RS in the limited number of areas that had sufficient minority returns, where non-Serb students (mostly Bosniaks) study the RS curriculum, but then separate out from their Serb peers to study "their" subjects. While better as an interim step than having no such option, the optics of dividing students during the course of the school day is stark and troubling. As years have passed, rather than steps being taken to ameliorate the situation, the politics of NGS have heightened. The Konjevic Polje case with its related protests has been the most visible recent illustration of this

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controversy, as the issue of accommodations to ensure the NGS is available to Bosniak students in the eastern RS gained renewed attention in the past two school years (Jukic 2013). The RS has continued to deny this demand. In fact, far from seeking accommodative measures, in 2014 the RS MoE doubled down on its policies by announcing that the handful of schools in the RS that *do* meet the onerous entity requirements [10] needed to secure the NGS option (around 20 schools), are now required to study and refer to the “language of the Bosniak people,” rather than the Bosnian language (Jukic 2014). Critics describe this as an effort to further stoke community divisions and deny the existence of any shared “Bosnia-ness”; an issue further burdened by perceptions of Bosniak appropriation of Bosnian identity.

Concluding Remarks and Future Outlook

In the current political environment it is unlikely these problems will be solved in the short-run. The international community has increasingly played a passive role, and has all but ceased to comment on the core problem – separate ethno-national curricula that divide students and restrict inter-group peace-building. The ruling powers see little to gain by promoting policies that might produce compromise or a more inclusive civic orientation – the main parties feed on nationalist sentiment, employment patronage systems, and compliant, unquestioning citizens, and schools offer a ready environment in which to pursue all of these objectives.

This does not mean that hope for reform is impossible, and there are a number of new players on the BiH scene which could provide an opportunity to hit the “reset button”: a new Head of the EU Delegation to BiH will be appointed in the upcoming months, the OSCE Mission to BiH has a new Head of Mission, and a number of embassies (including the U.S.) are welcoming new ambassadors. The Council of Europe in BiH has remained engaged in reminding local authorities of their obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights, but broadly speaking, education has simply not been viewed as a priority reform at the principal level. Croatia and Serbia should be encouraged to play a positive and less divisive role in terms of their engagement in these issues in BiH; a tall order when considering domestic politics in each of those countries, but a necessary one if the neighborhood is to be stable. In terms of domestic players, there will be a new Minister of Civil Affairs replacing the two-term incumbent, and post-election dynamics and coalitions could provide some slim opportunity to move away from practices that have led to stagnation at best, and regression at worst. In addition, the civic unrest that occurred throughout BiH in 2014 demonstrates increasing frustration among citizens with their socio-economic prospects, and public services such as education.

A renewed commitment to state-wide learning standards embedded in a common framework, educational mobility, critical thinking, civic education, media literacy, and multiperspectivity would not only help to break down divisions in BiH's schools, but help to better equip young people for jobs that require such analytical and intercultural skills. Lessons might be learned from an interesting domestic exception to BiH's entity and cantonal education policies. While far from perfect, education in the District of Brčko has a relatively more moderate approach to schooling than is seen in the rest of the country (Perry 2006). More aggressive use of strategic litigation to combat discriminatory practices, and more conditionality tied to *all* education-related donor funding, could provide carrots and sticks in an environment that is currently void of incentives to reform in all sectors. The alternative – continuation of “us” vs. “them” policies that marginalize minorities and teach new generations (already living in largely monoethnic communities) that learning and working together is neither possible nor desirable – cannot bode well for a future cohort of voters, or the future stability of the country. For this reason, education in a post-war, fragile state such as BiH should not be seen as “soft” or optional, but as a basic security issue.

Notes

[1] BiH, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bosnia will be used interchangeably in this chapter for reasons of style.

[2] The focus is on primary (compulsory) and secondary education in BiH, though the challenges in higher/tertiary education (both public and private) are also significant.

[3] Una-Sana (Bihac), Tuzla, Zenica-Doboj, Bosnia-Podrinje (Gorazde) and Sarajevo.

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[4] Posavina, West Herzegovina, and Canton 10 (known locally as Hercegbosanska Canton).

[5] Central Bosnia (Travnik) and Herzegovina-Neretva (Mostar).

[6] While there is a Federation level Ministry of Education in that entity, over the past several years its role has been marginalized, and often simply ignored by the Croat MoEs.

[7] There are three main curricula. The RS curriculum is used throughout that entity. The Federation curriculum exists for all students in that entity, but in practice is used in Bosniak majority areas, seen by Croat MoEs as a Bosniak option. The Croat MoEs instead use their own Croatian-language curriculum. The schools in Brcko have their own curriculum for students in the District.

[8] This exercise was initially seen as a first step towards broader curricular reform and harmonization. However, no such systemic reforms followed.

[9] There are some cases of NGS being offered in the Federation, mainly to Serb returnees.

[10] The *Interim Agreement* specifies the NGS should be organized if there are 18 or more students who want this option in a given grade. In schools with fewer than 18 students, discretion is left to the competent Ministry.

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About the author:

Valery Perry is a Senior Associate of the Democratization Policy Council, and teaches conflict analysis and resolution at the Sarajevo School of Science and Technology. She has worked on education reform policy issues at the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina. All opinions are her own.