Civil Society Actors and the Challenge of Dark Heritage in Bosnia

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MARTIN DUFFY, MAR 21 2022

Comparative analysis is a valuable research tool, but possesses limitations for analysing broad geographical areas like the Balkans, whereby ethnic heterogeneity entails more variation than spectrums of comparison. Likewise, Bosnia is internationally often compared to Korea or Northern Ireland because of the dark heritage the new state must confront, and the interventive role of community peace-building. In this essay while allusions will be made to fitting comparators among divided societies, there is insufficient space to develop these comparisons. When one talks about Bosnia one is implicitly talking about a still somewhat contested space in the territory of the former Yugoslavia that evolved out of the Dayton Peace Agreement. Given the ethnically heterogeneous nature of this territory, some allowance for fluidity must be allowed. In short this is an evaluation of cases of efforts to build peace, as opposed to a rigorous comparative analysis.

Structurally, we will begin with a review of Bosnian civil society in the final stages of civil war, followed by an analysis of Dayton peace-building. We will then explore the practical challenges of dark heritage in which women's contribution as peace-builders has been consistently under-represented. We will then subject civil society peace-building to closer scrutiny in order to answer the essential question of this paper, how civil society actors managed to challenge their dark heritage. Essentially, this investigation seeks to evaluate the grass-roots challenges in confronting Bosnia's dark heritage, rather than diplomatic manoeuvring. It must be emphasized that peace-building has become a rather precise topic, whereas for the purposes of this essay, efforts to build peace are only loosely defined and cover diverse efforts.

In defining civil society, this essay relies on the World Bank definition. The World Bank Group works with civil society, which includes: 'the wide array of non-governmental and not for profit organizations that have a presence in public life, express the interests and values of their members and others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations'(World Bank 2022). Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have emerged as a major force in international development in the past thirty years and World Bank Group has strengthened its engagement with civil society since 1981, when its first operational policy note on relations with CSos was approved by the World Bank's Board of Directors. Peace-building in Bosnia was strongly influenced by World Bank principles, albeit these were sometimes difficult to implement in the reality of the conflict.

I have observed or helped supervise almost every election across the former Yugoslavia since 1995. The Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995 did not create a sustainable process, and left much grass-roots peace work to be done. By 1995 almost all conflicting parties had achieved the division of territory they wanted (Hartwell 2019, 443-469). Dayton therefore solidified a de-centralized Bosnia and Herzegovina, split between two entities (the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and the Republika Srpska (RS.) The central government which arose out of that partition was implicitly weak, and to further complicate matters, the territory also includes the separate district of Brcko. While Brcko never returned to its pre-war balance of Bosnians, Serbs and Croats, there has been some progress in multi-ethnic integration which counter-balances it's obvious economic importance to the RS (Ibid). Dayton sought to end the conflict and reconstruct Bosnian civil society. It achieved the first but failed in the latter.

While peace-building at the non-governmental level is vital to postwar peace settlements, a case study of the town of

Mladi Most shows the limitations of such efforts in Bosnia (Gillard 2007, 77-98). Surveying pitfalls of the EU's peace-building activities, Stefanie Kappler and Oliver Richmond conclude their study in stating that 'by romanticizing civil society and selectively reinforcing existing power structures, the EU has failed to give society a stake in the peace that is being created' (Kappler et.al. 2011, 261-278). Local responses and forms of resistance have begun to emerge in Bosnia, 'challenging the EU's peace-building mission to move towards a more contextualized engagement with local society' (Ibid). This suggests that rather than focusing exclusively on the EU's formal institutional mechanisms, 'a more contextualized approach would seek to include a wide variety of local agencies and create a space in which Bosnian society might develop alternative versions of peace that relate to people's everyday lives' (Ibid). The EU's ultimate acid test was to embrace the diversity of Bosnia's local voices to promote a hybrid, sustainable peace (Ibid). Again, success was elusive.

Bosnian Civil Society

The concept of civil society has acquired an unprecedented popularity, especially in development programs. Robert Belloni investigates the international effort to build civil society in Bosnia in order to foster peace and democratization, suggesting the 'international community's lack of a coherent long-term strategy and the adoption of a conception of civil society that is often at odds with Bosnian context and history hinder the transition to genuine reconciliation among the three ethnic groups' (Belloni 2011, 163-180). Examining two major areas of intervention – the advocacy role of local civic groups and fostering citizens' participation – Belloni argues that the international community has failed to comprehend both the political and the social meaning of its involvement. Although the focus on civil society is meant to overcome external regulation and emphasize indigenous and community-based contributions to peace-building, the international community's approach is to make local development dependent upon an international presence. The result is a failure to address the structural problems that affect the country and to hinder, rather than foster, the formation of an open and democratic civil society (Ibid, 163-180). In this, therefore, there is a lack of sustainability.

Louis Monroy-Santander offers a case study of civil society action in the region of Sanski Most. Monroy-Santander (2015) seeks to investigate the issues that have made post-conflict reconstruction in Bosnia so difficult, looking at the political system, the state of the economy, the role played by international organizations and the processes of justice and reconciliation. Indeed, Monroy-Santander (2015, 88-94) details that 'ethnic cleansing and genocide, mainly against the Bosnian population, and concentration camps around the country'. Revealingly, he notes 'Mistrust and ethnic hatred are often passed from generation to generation. That seems to be true here in Bosnia, a country that has yet to come to terms with its violent past. The education system and media don't always help. Instead of being tools for reconciliation, both have become channels for fostering ethnic divisions'(Ibid).

In regard to the role of the media and education, Monroy-Santander notes that 'Bosnia's media is seen as biased, often giving an unhelpful ethnic angle to all kinds of issues. Schools generally remain segregated along ethnic lines, too. Some are mono-ethnic, others split up students in subjects deemed 'sensitive'. Programmes such as the "two schools under one roof" system, whereby students attend school in different shifts in order to avoid contact with different ethnic groups, continue' (Ibid). On social welfare, Monroy-Santander (Ibid) explains that 'High levels of unemployment – and particularly youth unemployment – pose another threat to the Bosnian economy and generate a pessimistic view among citizens about their country's future.' On a more encouraging note, however, Monroy-Santander (ibid) observes that: 'I've also been learning about peace-building initiatives that focus on youth and gender issues, transitional justice and creative ways of dealing with the past. There are also forums for inter-ethnic dialogue between Bosniaks, Bosnian-Serbs and Bosnian-Croats.'

To some extent, the limited capacity of peace groups to make a difference was a fate decided by the Dayton negotiators, who had a pragmatic goal of stopping the war at all costs whilst considering also the political fall-out if foreign troops died in defence of protracted peace negotiations. The Bosnian War remains the most brutal conflict in Europe post-World War II. Out of the pre-war 4.4 million Bosnian population, approximately 105,000 people lost their lives, just under 1.4 million were displaced and 1.2 million became refugees abroad (LSE 2015). The peace talks in Dayton were the last attempt to end the conflict. All previous diplomatic efforts had failed until the US diplomat Richard Holbrooke gathered together Slobodan Milosevic, Alija Izetbegovic and Franjo Tudjman, as well as several

European and Russian diplomats in what was effectively a 'head banging' exercise (Ibid).

At the time, both the British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd, and his Ambassador to the former Yugoslavia probably matched Holbrooke in 'hands on diplomacy', which was subsequently to raise questions about their personal business interests in the region (Traynor and Norton-Taylor 2010). One might argue this was an example of the 'other side' of civil society intervention, i.e. peace-building from the top down as opposed to the bottom up. It is certainly noteworthy however that Ambassador Pauline Neville-Jones proved every bit as robust in negotiation as Ambassador Holbrooke, although this proved to be her last mission.

Dayton Peace-building

Dayton saw skillful diplomacy, political trade-offs and military pressure exerted on warring parties. According to Monroy-Santander (ibid), it was a 'war-ending and peace-keeping tool but less effective for post-war peace-building.' Indeed it is almost incompatible with democratization and liberalization – the two principles of liberal peace-building. Dayton offers 'consociationalist institutions', power-sharing, proportionality etc., but peace workers on the ground must face the obstacle of a weak central administration and new institutions immersed in ethnic division. Bosnian society pays no respect to gender balance. Women have been great peace-workers but were effectively excluded from peace negotiations. There were no women from BiH present around the negotiating table and only one woman among the signatories, Dame Neville-Jones. A lamentable inaction on war crimes against women carries into post-conflict Bosnia and research shows that many women were subjected to domestic violence after the war (Ibid).

These sensitivities are revealed uniquely by Aleksandar Brezar's analysis of the Most Mira project. This envisages a permanent peace Centre near the site of a notorious wartime detention camp as part of efforts to help young Bosnians understand how to overcome divisions created by the conflict (Brezar 2019, 77-91). Brezar (Ibid) describes this town whose Serbian residents ran the detention camp in Omarska, 'imprisoning their neighbours, solely because they were Muslim.' The reality of having to challenge these local memories is recognized by Most Mira (Bridge of Peace), an international organization currently focused on peace-building in the traumatized areas near Omarska. This is dark heritage head on in a manner immeasurably more intrusive than in the likes of inter-communal displacement in Northern Ireland.

In Bosnia, Brezar (Ibid) describes 'a community divided and unprepared to deal with the consequences of the war crimes that were committed there', whereby. creative workshops and a visiting circus troupe were Most Mira's breakthrough events. One of the key figures in the project, American Nick Micinski, believes being a foreigner allows more honest conversations: 'It's not like the internationals are telling them how to solve the problem. It's adding a critical lens because you're not stuck in the cycle of politics' (Ibid). The project involves commemorations of wartime incidents, including the memorial event at Trnopolje, the largest Bosnian Serb-run internment camp in the Prijedor area. Some 30,000 passed through the Trnopolje camp in 1992.

The Challenge of dark heritage

The Trnopolje site which has a school sited on a notorious 'killing field' now hosts an annual commemoration. Micinski states: 'It's a harrowing experience, but the Project on Peace-building participants are eager to understand, without judgement' (Ibid). It's not about just visiting the site and pointing fingers at the culprits afterwards, but rather about understanding how these sites fit into a much bigger narrative. 'The thing we want to try and add is that this is one in a history of other acts of violence around the world. It's not about a hierarchy of suffering; it's not about [who is] the greatest victim' (Ibid).

Most Mira plans Kevljani's own Peace Centre, designed by local architects from Prijedor and Sarajevo with the help of foreign consultants. The Peace Centre will replace a torn-down building across from the notorious football field – site of numerous executions. The Centre will rebuild the first home in the village to be destroyed in 1992 – with a contemporary local meeting point. Peace-building has been undertaken by women's groups and mixed gender groups whose contribution is growing (Simic, 2014, 62-83.) Through training of war veterans their Centre for Non-violent Action (CNA) has become an important voice in the region. We need to further understand the role of women

and men, in particular war veterans, in peace building and how this has been used to bring about positive changes which not only benefit women, but the whole society.

Through their work, CNA promotes non-violence and dialogue by focusing on peace education. Simić (2014) argues that any peace-building initiative that does not seek to include both genders from the outset 'and within every stage of its activities will hardly challenge existing gender inequalities and stereotypes.' In short, the most effective peace work will be both gender and ethnic inclusive. After the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1992, women's NGOs emerged in all the ex-republics. As Hunt states, 'NGOs have been a new feature of Bosnian civil society since the demise of communism' (Hunt 2004, 259). When civil war became more likely, women spontaneously started to gather throughout the country to protest (Nikolic-Ristanovic 1999).

Shockingly an estimated 20,000 Bosnian Muslim women were raped by Bosnian Serb men in torture camps (Thomas and Ralph 1994). In their examination of these events, Thomas and Ralph (Ibid) assert that: 'These violations ranged from dehumanization to mutilation, rape, forced motherhood, prostitution, torture and sexual murder, and they were based on both sex and ethnicity. Rape of women was used as a weapon of war and as a tool for ethnic cleansing.' Throughout 1990 and 1991, women's groups across Yugoslavia organized protests calling for the demilitarization of Yugoslavia and led the peace movements (Waller and Rycenga 2001.) Women crossed the borders between warring parties, and under the name 'Women for Peace' issued a statement demanding peaceful solutions (Cockburn 1998, 167.) The challenge of surviving in the absence of men triggered the expansion of women's roles, both private and public. Many women became active in their communities. Medica Zenica and Zene Zenama Sarajevo [Women to Women Sarajevo] were among the first NGOs established in the region with the aim of supporting women violated in the conflict. In 1993, Medica Zenica was established as a women's therapy centre to assist women victims of trauma and sexual violence.

Women as Peace-builders

Across the former Yugoslavia, the NGO 'Women in Black' assisted men hiding from conscription or who had fled their units (Cockburn 2007, 85). They provided moral and political support to such men and in this way acted on their feminist and anti-militarist beliefs (Ibid, 85). War offered women opportunities to transform their images of themselves. Groups like 'Women in Black' thus contributed to peace building, opposed sexual violence and laid the seeds for mixed gender initiatives. Bosnia has therefore more recently experienced a significant male participation in all aspects of peace work. The Women Peacemakers Program (WPP) believes that training gender sensitive males is important as they can act as powerful role models for achieving gender equality. This is in keeping with UN principles which echo the position of WPP that sustainable peace is gender-neutral. The UNESCO Constitution states that 'since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed' (UNESCO 1945).

Subsequently, WPP therefore prioritize the reintegration of war veterans, and their peace work has been recognized by other Bosnian grass-roots post- conflict organizations, such as the CNA. During the war itself men were either fighting or eluding capture. In 1997, CNA founded its first office in Belgrade under peace activist Nenad Vukosavljevic, who had conducted non-violence trainings across the region of ex-Yugoslavia (Fischer 2006). In 2001, CNA opened in Sarajevo. CNA's staff have always been proudly gender and ethnic-neutral. CNA have made a vital contribution to supporting NGO activists in 'social activism', irrespective of identity (Hasanbegović 2001). Equally, They promote peace education, reconciliation of the past, and peace building (Rill et.al. 2007). The CNA not only have a gender-balanced staff but also prioritize gender training. It is calculated that at least half a million people in the former Yugoslavia are ex-combatants (Traces 2004). CNA thus articulate its peace building work 'from the perspective of building peace, former soldiers represent a significant potential because many of them…need to contribute to the building of a more just society and feel the responsibility for all that happened…[Their experience] …offers a direct opportunity for confronting the motives, fears and ideals which prompted people to become actors in the war' (Ibid, 32).

As Beara and Miljanovic (2006, 148) argue, many of the war veterans now feel rejected and abandoned by the community they thought they were fighting for. One veteran said, 'It would suit the state much better if we had died,

then it wouldn't have any responsibilities. You feel helpless, rejected by everyone. And we fought because they asked us. It's not like I wanted to go to war'). The CNA incorporates this previously unheard group in its peace-building work (CNA 2004). As a result of their traumatization, war veterans are often vocal but need encouragement (Wils 2004). The CNA has given a voice to these often-traumatized veterans through media work which is designed to promote reflection. Against all apparent obstacles, peace workers across Bosnia have shown their capacity to effect change and to contribute to genuine efforts of community reconciliation.

Evaluating Civil Society Efforts

As Yuval-Davis (1999) points out, women's peace-building would not be able to reach its full potential in conflict affected societies, as long as their transversal dialogue remains at the level of social movement. A sustainable peace-building requires transversal perspective to be shared at all levels, including those in the high-level negotiations. Bosnia has not made the crucial break-thrown so that transversal dialogue occurred to ensure significant female representation at the highest political levels. An unhealthy gender imbalance remains, which strikes at the heart of sustainable governance.

Women have not fared well at entry to high political level in Bosnia compared with say Northern Ireland, where the Women's Coalition was instrumental in securing power-sharing and enjoyed success, albeit brief. Women are represented at senior levels in all political parties. Currently, women are in leadership roles in four of the major political parties in Northern Ireland and women have occupied the two Executive leadership posts of First and Deputy First Minister. While Bosnia does not compare favorably with this, the role which civil society has contributed to peace work is notable in both societies. Again, emphasizing the limits set for what is a narrow evaluation rather than research comparison, the example of Northern Ireland would suggest that transversal dialogue must reach the top. Even Northern Ireland has shown diversity limitations, but in Bosnia the race has scarcely commenced.

Bosnia has a peace mapped out artificially by Dayton, which ultimately created a weak central government. Bosnian society is unavoidably in the eye of an international storm which dictates regional security policy. Given the unwelcoming and rigid environment faced by peace groups, Bosnian civil society has achieved much to contribute to regional peace. In fairness, their achievements must be viewed with formidable political obstacles in relief. One hopes that Bosnian society will experience a transversal breakthrough which will ensure equal female representation in politics, but one says that with a caveat that the Northern Ireland experience shows that this is far from being a panacea. The future looks bright for civil society efforts to build peace, but the past history shows that all peace-building achievements are forged against adversity.

Conclusion

In recent years there has been interest in fostering local 'zones of peace'. These involve communities withdrawing from areas of conflict and seeking forms of protection. This is a community-based variant of an earlier concept of 'zones of peace' which received patronage under statesmen such as the Nobel Peace Laureate, Oscar Arias (Duffy, 1997). Under the principle of R2P (Responsibility to Protect) and as a result of refinements in humanitarian law, there has also been extensive research on 'protected zones'. In Bosnia, as in the case of Northern Ireland, civil society efforts to build peace may encapsulate the concept of civil peace spaces. Future peace workers in divided societies like Bosnia, or indeed Northern Ireland may yet persuade their legislators to create such municipal or civil areas for peace and reconciliation, which could be more than just a symbolic affirmation of a concept, but genuinely represent areas legally protected from future conflict.

The journalist Gavin Esler has said 'Bosnia and Ukraine remind us that peace is fragile. Iraq and Syria remind us that no society or culture is immune from conflict.' As Ukraine descends into total war, and as Iraq and Syria remain weeping, we must encourage the grass-roots peace actors who confront such a dark heritage. Faced with such atavistic conflict, civil society actors are often our only guardians impeding its repetition. Recent Bosnian elections have seen little diminution in the ethnic rivalry shafting the nascent state. Perhaps, decades after Dayton, the 2022 presidential elections may prove to be an acid-test of change. For that to happen all Bosnian citizens, irrespective of ethnicity or religion, must surely confront that dark heritage of the Bosnian past. The very anthropocentric core of

Bosnian history is buried in the new state's massive archives, offering a kaleidoscope of divided images and voices. Can civil society actors build unity or must they perpetuate the factions of the past? Only time will tell.

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About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.