

# FROM WARSAW TO TIRANA: OVERCOMING THE PAST TOGETHER

Good practices and lessons learned from the  
Visegrad Four and Western Balkans



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From Warsaw to Tirana: Overcoming the past together

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## Foreword

Reconciliation and good neighbourly relations are among the key priorities of the Stabilisation and Association Process of the Western Balkans and represent a necessary condition for the advancement of the countries of the region towards the EU. It has become clear that without launching a process supporting the dealing with the legacies of the past, filled with conflicts, violence, separation and mutual prejudices, the region will not be able to move forward from the limbo it is still stuck in, twenty years after the last violent conflict.

Despite significant efforts and resources invested in the reconciliation in the Western Balkans by the EU through different platforms and tools, and the activities of civil society across the region, only relatively little progress has been achieved in this very complex and sensitive process. The sentiments and resentments against “the other” are still running high in the societies, providing easy opportunities for manipulation by nationalist political leaders. There is still a need for more regionally-owned initiatives and real implementation of the steps advancing the reconciliation process forward. A step in the right direction has been the establishment of Regional Youth Cooperation Council (RYCO), fostering the reconciliation and stability process with a specific focus on youth as a key actor in shaping of the future of the region, as well as the Western Balkans Fund (WBF), aimed at supporting regional grass-roots initiatives coming from the civil society and non-governmental sector. However, both institutions are still in the process of establishing themselves on the regional scene and remain too vulnerable to political influence, at times becoming hostage of bilateral disputes.

Examples and best practices from other countries and regions can serve as inspiration on how to enhance the reconciliation process. This was the case of RYCO, which was established on the example of the Franco-German Youth Council, and the Western Balkans Fund, established according to the model of the International Visegrad Fund, a successful institution in the framework of the cooperation among Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia). Drawing on these previous positive examples, this project focused on the reconciliation processes and applied practices in the Visegrad Four, region, who in some respects share similarities to the Western Balkans with its historical experience and complicated mixture of national minorities and inter-ethnic tensions stemming from the difficult and often violent past.

For the purpose of identifying good practices but also less positive examples and lessons learned, applicable to the Western Balkan countries, five case studies analysing different bilateral relations were written: Poland-Germany, Czechia-Slovakia, Slovakia-Hungary, Hungary-Serbia, Serbia-Albania. The aim of these case studies was to provide the background for the given cases, identify good practices and also failures in reconciliation and normalization between countries and societies in their respective processes of dealing with the past, and draw lessons and recommendations for the Western Balkan countries on the basis of these analyses.

Apart from the practical recommendations and inspiration with concrete initiatives, the research conducted in the project reveals the common patterns and sheds light on the building blocks of a successful process of reconciliation and normalization of mutual relations. The case studies show that complicated inter-ethnic relations and minority issues are not a problem limited only to the Western Balkan region, but that other countries have been dealing with similar issues too. The successful experience of the Visegrad countries with regional cooperation as well as European integration further helps to clarify how and with what limitations these two processes, both among main objectives of the Western Balkan countries, can support reconciliation between countries and communities.

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# The ups and downs of Polish-German reconciliation and lessons for the Western Balkans

*Adam Balcer, Klaus Ziemer*

## Introduction

In 2017, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs established the “Reconciliation and Remembrance” seminar, which aims to share the experience of Polish-German reconciliation as an inspiration for improving relations between the Western Balkan nations and overcoming historical barriers. The project is implemented in cooperation with the Krzyżowa Foundation and the German Embassy. Certainly, Polish-German reconciliation may serve to a certain degree as a source of inspiration for the similar processes taking place in the Western Balkans. The relevance of Polish-German reconciliation stems from its showcase or paradigmatic character. Lily Gardner Feldman who has studied the policy of reconciliation of post-war Germany and Poland<sup>1</sup> found that its success was based on the fulfilment of five criteria which are crucial in any process of reconciliation:

1. “Visions”. Politicians must know what the relations between their states and societies should look like in the future and conceive a strategy towards realization of this aim.
2. “Leadership”. A politician who is convinced of his “vision” should try to implement it even against political opposition.
3. “Symbols”. They give the process of reconciliation a necessary emotional dimension.
4. “Coming to terms with history”. This concerns on the one hand the sincere discussion of historians of both sides on difficult questions of common history. On the other hand, crimes committed must be punished.
5. “Continuity of institutional cooperation”. Important for the persistency of grass-root bilateral cooperation is lasting public financial support, e.g. for partnerships between towns.

On the other hand, the idea of Polish-German reconciliation as a point of reference for such processes in the Western Balkans faces certain limitations. The main difference between Polish-German reconciliation and Western Balkan cases originates from the peculiarity of the legacy of past in the first case. Coming to terms with the divisive past of the Western Balkans requires discussion on not only the most recent conflicts (1991-1999) between Serbs and their neighbours (Albanians, Bosniaks, Croats) but also the legacy of confrontations between them taking place in 19-20th centuries, including during WW II. Meanwhile, the legacy of WW II occupies a central place in Polish-German reconciliation. However, the death toll (of at least 2 million ethnic Poles), the dramatic asymmetry between the number of Polish and German victims respectively, and simplicity (Nazi Germany as the main perpetrator) reflect key differences between the Polish-German case and that of the wider Western Balkans.

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<sup>1</sup> Feldman, L.G., *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation. From Enmity to Amity*, Lanham et al. 2012.

The genocide committed by the Croatian fascists (Ustasha)<sup>2</sup> against the Serbs in Bosnia and Croatia represents relatively the most similar case to the Nazi German massive extermination of Poles. However, even in that case considerable differences may be observed. For instance, the asymmetry between the number of Serbs killed by Croats and Bosniaks vs. the latter killed by Serbs during WW II and after was decisively smaller than the disparity of death toll between Poles and Germans. Moreover, in that period, besides victims of genocides<sup>3</sup> and crimes against humanity in Bosnia and Croatia, many people died due to conflicts of different character than purely national (civil political war, fight against occupiers). The disparity between Polish-German case and conflicts waged in the 90s in the former Yugoslavia concerning the death toll and asymmetry in ethnic background of victims is even more prominent.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, the drawing of lessons from the Polish-German reconciliation, as will be shown in our text, requires acknowledgement of not only its successes but also its failures. Generally, the Polish-German case confirms the fragility of reconciliations and that the instrumentalization of the past by politicians represents the most important challenge to the reconciliation.

### **The case study of the Polish-German reconciliation**

Poles and Germans had several centuries of common history characterized rather by coexistence than confrontation. However, the WW II poisoned Polish-German relations to a degree which could hardly be worse. German aggression against Poland in 1939 was followed by a policy of systematic extermination which should be recognized as genocide. The Germans justified their crimes on the basis on the Nazi racial theory, which regarded ethnic Poles as racially inferior *Untermenschen*. The Nazi master plan entailed the expulsion of the majority of ethnic Poles, the enslavement of the rest of them and the extermination of elites. In effect, through the war ethnic Poles suffered everyday brutal persecution by the occupational German authorities, destruction of cultural heritage, mass executions (especially during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944), imprisonment in concentration camps, forced labour and deportations and Germanization. By 1942, Poland became the main arena of implementation of the Nazi plan to kill every Jew in German-occupied Europe (ghettos, death camps).

As a consequence of German genocidal policies, around 5,5 million (from among 35 million in 1939) Polish citizens were killed during the WW II. More than 90% of the three million Polish Jews were extinguished under German command.<sup>5</sup> In 1945, the Big Three in Yalta and Potsdam decided to give to the Soviet Union almost all the Eastern territories of Poland which already in 1939 had been occupied by the Red Army on the basis of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact. Poland received in exchange hitherto German territories East

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<sup>2</sup> Tomasevich J., *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945 Occupation and Collaboration*, Stanford 2001, pp. 380-415.

<sup>3</sup> Certain massacres accompanied by ethnic cleansing committed by Serbian nationalist forces (Chetniks) should be recognized as genocide. Communist forces are also perpetrators in massive crimes against humanity during the war and afterwards. However, all these crimes did not match the genocide committed by Ustasha. Tomasevich J., *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: The Chetniks*. Stanford 1975.

<sup>4</sup> In the 1990s, the number of Croat, Bosniak and Albanian victims in conflicts with Serbs was higher than the Serbian death toll. A particularly huge gap concerning the casualties exists between Serbs, on the one hand, and Bosniaks and Albanians on the other.

<sup>5</sup> Materski W., Szarota T., *Polska 1939- 1945, straty osobowe i ofiary represji pod dwiema okupacjami*, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Warsaw 2009.



of the rivers Oder and Neisse (except the Northern part of East Prussia which was given to the Soviet Union). The absolute majority of the Germans living in these regions fled or were expelled from their homelands in consequence of the activities of the Red Army and Polish Communist authorities towards largely destroyed Germany in its new borders. Several hundred thousand of them perished due to the hunger, diseases, exhaustion and massacres.<sup>6</sup>

During the first decade after 1945 it was highly understandable that Poles had a deep antipathy towards the Germans. On the other side, many Germans considered themselves victims of the war (expellees, victims of the allied bombardments etc.) without considering what the reason for the fate had been. Contacts between Poles and Germans were made even more difficult by the beginning Cold War and the division of Germany. On the state level, there were no diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and Communist Poland until 1972. A breakthrough in the public discourse about Poland and other countries East from Germany was brought in October 1965 by a memorandum by the German Protestant Church on the relationship between the Germans and their Eastern neighbours.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, the sufferings of the German expellees and their contribution to building up post-war Germany were exposed. On the other, for the first time the question of German guilt and what consequences Germany had to bear for that became a topic of public discussion. This memorandum initiated an unprecedented fierce discussion among public and split the German society. In the long run, however, this memorandum contributed to a new perspective of German responsibility for World War II and the crimes Germans had committed. It also paved "bottom-up" the way for Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik and the acceptance of the post war Polish-German border in German society.

On the Polish side, a few weeks after the publication of the memorandum by the Protestant Church, the Polish Catholic bishops present in Rome at the Second Vatican council addressed in November 1965 a letter to the German bishops.<sup>8</sup> As the moral authority of Polish society, especially under Communist rule, the Catholic bishops drew in this letter a picture of a thousand years of Polish-German neighbourhood which for centuries had been mostly good. This interpretation of Polish-German history was completely different from the discourse of the Communist party (a thousand years of struggle) and culminated in the words: "We forgive, and we ask for forgiveness".<sup>9</sup> These words were a shock for Polish society which was completely unprepared for such a message. In response, Communist leadership launched a fight against the Catholic church which was the fiercest one since Stalinist times. The difficulty of Polish bishops' situation was further enhanced as the answer of the German Catholic bishops was rather half-

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas R. M., *Orderly and Humane. The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War*, Yale University Press, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> "Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, Die Lage der Vertriebenen und das Verhältnis des deutschen Volkes zu seinen östlichen Nachbarn", Hannover 1965, online at [https://www.ekd.de/ekd\\_de/ds\\_doc/ostdenkschrift\\_1965.pdf](https://www.ekd.de/ekd_de/ds_doc/ostdenkschrift_1965.pdf) [31 October 2019].

<sup>8</sup> "Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, Orędzie biskupów polskich do ich niemieckich braci w chrystusowym urzędzie pasterskim", online at [https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WE/kep/oredzie-niem\\_18111965.html](https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WE/kep/oredzie-niem_18111965.html) [31 October 2019].

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

hearted. They wanted to avoid a clear positioning towards the new Polish-German border because of their close relations to CDU/CSU and the organizations of the expellees. Their attitude changed after the ratification in 1972 of the treaty in which the Federal Republic recognized the new Polish-German border.

Whereas the Protestant memorandum in Germany led to a change in the attitude towards Poland in a politically significant way, the letter of the Polish bishops started in Poland during the Communist period a change in the attitude towards Germany only among a small group of Catholic intellectuals. At the beginning of the 90s, most of Poles and Germans expressed mutual antipathy in opinion polls.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, since the end of the 1960s meetings of members of Polish "Clubs of the Catholic Intelligentsia" and West and East German intellectuals, especially connected with the Protestant and the Catholic church, were at the beginning of an authentic dialogue between a small but influential minority which got acquainted with the way of thinking of the other side. This was especially important for the Polish partners, as among their members protagonists like Tadeusz Mazowiecki or Władysław Bartoszewski obtained leading political offices after 1989.

A key step for the Polish-German reconciliation was the signing in 1970 of the treaty in which the Federal Republic of Germany acknowledged the existing Polish-German border. In the long run, more important was, however, the symbolic impact of Brandt's kneeling down in Warsaw.<sup>11</sup> After the ratification of this treaty in 1972, diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic and Poland were established. A weak point of Ostpolitik became, however, evident when Solidarność was founded in Poland in 1980. While the aims of Solidarność corresponded with the political values of the West German political elites, the issue was that the partners of Ostpolitik were governments which were not democratically legitimized. The stronger Solidarność was getting, the more the Communist partners of Ostpolitik were losing the basis of their political power. The political attitude of the German government was rather ambivalent when martial law was introduced in Poland in December 1981 and Solidarność was repressed. In contrast, the reaction of German society was overwhelming. Hundreds of transports with food and other goods of basic need were organized, millions of parcels were sent to Poland which was experiencing a severe crisis of supply. Many Poles were astonished by the extent of spontaneous help and started to perceive German society in a new way.

A new chapter in Polish-German relations was opened when Solidarność defeated the Communist regime in 1989. Prime minister Mazowiecki declared in his program of government that Poland wanted to create Polish-German relations according to the pattern of German-French relations. It seemed symbolic that in the evening of the first

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<sup>10</sup> Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, "Stosunek do innych narodów", online at [https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2019/K\\_017\\_19.PDF](https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2019/K_017_19.PDF), [31 October 2019].

<sup>11</sup> "Układ między Polską Rzeczpospolitą Ludową a Republiką Federalną Niemiec o podstawach normalizacji ich wzajemnych stosunków z 7 grudnia 1970 r.", [https://pl.wikisource.org/wiki/Uk%C5%82ad\\_mi%C4%99dzy\\_Polsk%C4%85\\_Rzecz%C4%85pospolit%C4%85\\_Ludow%C4%85\\_a\\_Republik%C4%85\\_Federaln%C4%85\\_Niemiec\\_o\\_podstawach\\_normalizacji\\_ich\\_wzajemnych\\_stosunk%C3%B3w\\_z\\_7\\_grudnia\\_1970\\_r](https://pl.wikisource.org/wiki/Uk%C5%82ad_mi%C4%99dzy_Polsk%C4%85_Rzecz%C4%85pospolit%C4%85_Ludow%C4%85_a_Republik%C4%85_Federaln%C4%85_Niemiec_o_podstawach_normalizacji_ich_wzajemnych_stosunk%C3%B3w_z_7_grudnia_1970_r), [31 October 2019].

day of chancellor Helmut Kohl's carefully prepared visit to Poland the Berlin wall collapsed. During this visit, the historic "mass of reconciliation" in Krzyżowa took place. The Polish and the German chiefs of government, Mazowiecki and Kohl, offered each other the "sign of peace".

Less than a year later, Germany was united and two fundamental treaties for Polish-German relations were signed,<sup>12</sup> confirming the existing Polish-German border and establishing good neighborly relations and cooperation by setting the legal basis for the future cooperation between the civil societies of both sides. An intense cooperation between municipalities and regions all along the common border from the Baltic Sea to the Czech Republic was established. Currently, there exist almost 1000 very vivid partnerships between Polish and German towns. The Polish-German Youth Office, founded in 1991 according to the German-French model, has in the meantime contributed to interactions between some 3 million young Poles and Germans.<sup>13</sup> There is an intensive exchange between schools and a close cooperation between universities, NGOs and think-tanks supported by both central and local governments.

The common commemoration of important events by top Polish and German politicians were important for the reconciliation process as well. During his participation in the commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Warsaw uprising in 1994, the Federal President Roman Herzog asked the Polish people for forgiveness for the suffering brought upon them by the Germans during the war. The Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Władysław Bartoszewski, later during his speech in German Parliament called Herzog's speech "the real and long expected answer" to the letter of the Polish bishops of 1965 and he expressed sympathy to "the individual fate and the suffering of innocent Germans" who lost their homeland.<sup>14</sup> During a common opening ceremony of an exposition in Berlin on the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Warsaw uprising, the presidents Komorowski and Gauck delivered in the presence of veterans of the uprising touching words showing how a common commemoration of tragic events may bring Poles and Germans closer to each other even today. Also the speeches by presidents Duda and Steinmeier in Wieluń and Warsaw on the same occasion in 2019 resonated very well in Polish public.

### **Coming to terms with history – lessons learned**

Dealing with history is an integral part of a successful reconciliation process and establishment of sincere discussion of historians from both sides on the difficult topics of

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<sup>12</sup> "Traktat między Rzeczpospolitą Polską a Republiką Federalną Niemiec o potwierdzeniu istniejącej między nimi granicy, podpisany w Warszawie dnia 14 listopada 1990 r."

"Traktat między Rzeczpospolitą Polską a Republiką Federalną Niemiec o dobrym sąsiedztwie i przyjaznej współpracy z 17.06.1991 r."

<sup>13</sup> Polsko-Niemiecka Współpraca Młodzieży, <https://www.pnwm.org/o-pnwm/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ziemer K., *From Hatred to Friendly Cooperation: Poland and Germany after the Second World War*, in *The India-Pakistan Reconciliation and other Experiences in Post-conflict Management*, ed. Gilles Boquerat and Richard Asbeck, Paris 2009, p.115.

common history is an important step in its facilitation. Apart from the discussion of historian with the purpose of setting unbiased narratives about historic events, crimes committed in the name of the former dictatorship must be punished. Because of insufficient denazification among public prosecutors and judges, the systematic persecution of war crimes began in Germany only in the 1960s, when it was too late for many war criminals to be hauled up before a court. However, Polish and West German historians in 1972 founded a joint commission on school-books concerning history and geography which is functioning until today.<sup>15</sup> A German Historical Institute in Warsaw was established in 1993 and a Polish equivalent in Berlin in 2006.<sup>16</sup> Co-operation between Polish and German historians became very intense and fruitful. Hundreds of books were published together by Polish and German authors.<sup>17</sup>

The view on history in society, however, is determined not only by historians, but also by politicians, the media, and family narration. History is often used (and misused) in political conflicts. At the beginning of the 2000s a wave of publications, documentations and films focused on the fate of Germans at the end of WW II appeared, irritating Polish public. Moreover, in 2000, a foundation created primarily by functionaries of the Federation of Expellees (BdV)<sup>18</sup>, demanded the creation of the Center against Expulsions (ZgV) in Berlin.<sup>19</sup> In Poland this was perceived as a re-writing of history by the Germans, turning perpetrators into victims. The chairwoman of the BdV, Erika Steinbach (for many years CDU-deputy to the Bundestag, today close to AfD), in Germany a rather little-known hardliner, dominated for a couple of years the headlines of Polish media with controversial statements and burdened Polish-German relations. In Germany this was hardly noticed. The situation was further aggravated with the establishment of the "Prussian Trusteeship" by hardliners of the BdV, demanding the return or compensation of real estate of former German owners in territories now belonging to Poland. This caused fears among millions of Poles. The "Prussian Trusteeship" took this question even to the European Court of Human Rights in 2006 and lost in 2008.

The rule of coalition dominated by the Law and Justice (PiS), a national populist party, contributed to increased tensions between Warsaw and Berlin in 2005-2007. In 2007 and 2015, when PiS was in opposition, the Polish-German bilateral relations improved significantly, although Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of opposition, remained strongly critical of the reconciliation with Germany presenting it as an insincere kitsch.<sup>20</sup> In 2015,

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<sup>15</sup> Wspólna Polsko-Niemiecka Komisja Podręcznikowa, <http://deutsch-polnische.schulbuchkommission.de/pl/strona-glowna.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Deutsches Historisches Institut Warschau, Niemiecki Instytut Historyczny w Warszawie, <https://www.dhi.waw.pl/pl.html>, Centrum Badań Historycznych PAN, Das Zentrum für Historische Forschung Berlin der Polnischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, <http://www.cbh.pan.pl/de>.

<sup>17</sup> Four-volume publication *Polsko-niemieckie miejsca pamięci* („Polish-German places of memory”) represents one of the most prominent examples of cooperation between Polish and German historians.

<sup>18</sup> Bund der Vertriebenen, [www.bund-der-vertriebenen.de](http://www.bund-der-vertriebenen.de).

<sup>19</sup> Zenter gegen Vertreibungen, [www.z-g-v.de](http://www.z-g-v.de).

<sup>20</sup> Kaczyński declared that Germany wants to subdue Poland because it dreams of territories lost after the WW II. According to him, Germany can someday realize its dreams and “we will wake up in smaller Poland”. Therefore, through this lens, German investments in Western Poland pose a threat to Polish security. Kaczyński also accused many times a huge part of Polish cultural elite and political opposition of being the fifth column on German payroll. In the Law and Justice’s discourse, Germany is often presented as a traditional ally of Russia trying together with Moscow to divide

PiS returned to power and established the first single party government for in Poland's history. The transformation of Poland's political system under the rule of PiS from liberal democracy based on checks and balances into the "majoritarian" system dominated by the ruling party undermining the rule of law in the country ignited harsh criticism from the EU and an unprecedented deterioration of relations between Poland and various EU actors, including Germany. In response, PiS strengthened the use of historical arguments evoking the WW II in its policy towards Germany which translated also into a regress in the Polish-German reconciliation. Kaczyński accused Germany of attempts to water down the German responsibility for the crimes committed during the WW II and to shift the blame on other nations, including Poles,<sup>21</sup> suggesting also that Germany has not changed dramatically since the WW II.<sup>22</sup>

In response to the proposal by the EU to limit the allocation of EU funds to Poland based on the problems with rule of law, Polish government raised the issue of German reparations for the crimes and devastation committed during the WW II. Immediately after the elections in 2015, PiS established the committee on reparations in the Polish parliament. However, Poland has not made an official demand for reparations yet and for German side the matter is closed due to existing international treaties which have been signed since the end of WW II. Nevertheless, the issue continues being raised by Polish authorities. For instance, in an interview with German tabloid Bild, Poland's President Andrzej Duda said that the Polish-German relations are a model example of a reconciliation but added that paying the WWII reparations to Poland is "a matter of accountability and morality."<sup>23</sup> According to opinion polls, the demand for reparations is supported by majority of Poles while Germans decisively reject it.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

The Polish-German reconciliation, started more than 50 years ago, achieved a spectacular progress particularly taking into consideration the burden of enormous crimes committed by Nazi Germany during the WW II against Poles. Growing mutual perception of Poles and

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Poland, as it happened several times in the past (especially recalling Ribbentrop-Molotov pact). Kaczyński called many times his own country a German-Russian condominium. See Jarosław Kaczyński, *Polska naszych marzeń*, Warszawa 2011.

<sup>21</sup> "German politics of memory [is] conducted for 70 years in a very consistent manner, in order to reduce Germany's guilt and at the same time convince the world that Germany is completely different."

"Prezes PiS: Stuprocentową odpowiedzialność za Holokaust ponoszą Niemcy", *tvpinfo.com*, [www.tvp.info/37865894/prezes-pis-stuprocentowa-odpowiedzialnosc-za-holokaust-ponosza-niemcy](http://www.tvp.info/37865894/prezes-pis-stuprocentowa-odpowiedzialnosc-za-holokaust-ponosza-niemcy), [31 October 2019].

<sup>22</sup> Alluding to Germany, Kaczyński said, "One needs to remember where and in which culture the greatest threats to Europe, the world and moral order exist." "Jarosław Kaczyński o pogromie w Białymstoku: to była wina państwa niemieckiego i narodu niemieckiego", *Wirtualna Polska*, [www.wiadomosci.wp.pl/jaroslaw-kaczynski-o-pogromie-w-bialymstoku-to-byla-wina-panstwa-niemieckiego-i-narodu-niemieckiego-6027392472183425a](http://www.wiadomosci.wp.pl/jaroslaw-kaczynski-o-pogromie-w-bialymstoku-to-byla-wina-panstwa-niemieckiego-i-narodu-niemieckiego-6027392472183425a), [31 October 2019].

<sup>23</sup> "„Wir werden eine Rechnung vorlegen!“, Polens Präsident Andrzej Duda im Bild-Interview", *Bild*, [www.bild.de/bild-plus/politik/ausland/politik-ausland/jahrestag-des-zweiten-weltkriegs-polen-praesident-duda-im-bild-interview-64306980.view=conversionToLogin.bild.html](http://www.bild.de/bild-plus/politik/ausland/politik-ausland/jahrestag-des-zweiten-weltkriegs-polen-praesident-duda-im-bild-interview-64306980.view=conversionToLogin.bild.html), [31 October 2019].

<sup>24</sup> CBOS, "Postrzeżenie II wojny światowej i poparcie dla domagania się reparacji od Niemiec", [www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2019/K\\_113\\_19.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2019/K_113_19.PDF), [31 October 2019], "Große Mehrheit gegen Reparationen für Polen und Griechenland", *Die Zeit*, [www.zeit.de/news/2019-08/30/grosse-mehrheit-gegen-reparationen-fuer-polen-und-griechenland](http://www.zeit.de/news/2019-08/30/grosse-mehrheit-gegen-reparationen-fuer-polen-und-griechenland), [31 October 2019].

Germans has contributed to reconciliation and improved substantially over the years. However, the opinion polls show that the gap exists still between a more positive attitude of Poles towards Germans than vice versa.<sup>25</sup> This is probably due to the fact that Poles are much better acquainted with Germany than the other way around. The most important anchor of the reconciliation is today – apart from a continuously growing economic exchange – the intense relations between both civil societies. It makes a decisive reversal of reconciliation highly unlikely. Because of this success, Polish-German reconciliation may serve as a source of inspiration for the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, it should be recognized that a substantial difference between legacies of history in Polish-German case and Western Balkan equivalents limits the relevance of the reconciliation between Poles and Germans for the Western Balkan nations. Paradoxically the legacy of wars taking place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Western Balkans, considerably more complicated than the Polish-German modern history, may make the reconciliation process more difficult and challenging.

Currently, even more important lesson which the Western Balkan nations may draw from the Polish-German reconciliation is its fragility and exposure to negative spillovers from bilateral interstate relations and internal political developments. Indeed, Polish-German relations on the level of governments have deteriorated in recent years contributing to a certain regress in reconciliation. The issue of coming to terms with a difficult past is again emerging - as the case of reparation demands shows - as one of key divisive issues. Moreover, the aggravation of bilateral relations resulted also in the mutual decrease of sympathy between both nations, though until now to a lesser degree in Germany. The achieved degree of mutual understanding between Polish and German societies is not given once and forever. It is a task to be continued daily and it may be endangered when politicians playing with nationalistic fire are emphasizing the negative memories of the past for short-term political interests.

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<sup>25</sup> Łada A., "Polaków lubi tylko jedna trzecia Niemców", *Polityka*, [www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/1751244,1.polakow--lubi-tylko-jedna-trzecia-niemcow.read](http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/1751244,1.polakow--lubi-tylko-jedna-trzecia-niemcow.read), [31 October 2019].



# The Velvet Divorce: Dissolution of Czechoslovakia as an inspiration for the Western Balkans

*Tatiana Chovancová, Jana Juzová*

## Introduction

The example of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, referred to also as the “Velvet Divorce”, in the early 1990s, often serves as a model of peaceful dissolution of a joint state. While the context of the joint Czechoslovak state and its split as well as the shared history of Czechs and Slovaks is very different from that of the Western Balkan countries, due to its peaceful, well-managed preparation as well as the implementation and establishment of “above-standard” friendly relations after the dissolution, for which is Czechoslovakia studied as a model example and compared to other states’ dissolutions, it would be impossible not to include it among the cases studied in this project.

It is a general feeling in the Czech Republic and Slovakia that the current relations are better than they were in the times of the joint state, although according to the recent polls most Czechs and Slovaks believe the relations have not changed much.<sup>26</sup> Both countries refer to each other as the closest ally and a natural partner. The visits between the Czech and Slovak representatives are very frequent and friendly (for example, as a matter of tradition, the first foreign visit by newly elected presidents of both countries heads to Czech Republic or Slovakia respectively).

However, the context of this breakup and the issues and developments leading up to it usually remain left aside. While nowadays there is an apparent lack of conflicting issues among Czechs and Slovaks, life in the shared state was far from ideal and the burden of history played its role as well. Czechoslovakia was born after World War I with the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, both a product of Czechs and Slovaks breaking free from their former rulers and a way to gain more international strength and recognition compared to individual, smaller states. After the Munich agreement and the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia the joint state suffered the first crisis as the Czech part of the state turned into an occupied territory while a collaborationist regime was established in Slovakia (the “Slovak State”). After World War II and defeat of the Nazi and fascist regimes in Europe, Czechoslovakia was re-established, this time under a communist regime controlled by the Soviet Union.

Grievances existed even within the first Czechoslovak state – Slovaks blamed the Czechs for lack of interest in Slovakia, the concentration of crucial industries in the Czech lands and feeling of exclusion from decision-making happening in Prague. On the other hand, in the Czech part of the state, some viewed Slovakia as the weaker part that needs to be

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<sup>26</sup> Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění, “Tisková zpráva: Rozdělení Československa: 25 let od vzniku samostatné ČR a SR”, [https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com\\_form2content/documents/c2/a4464/f9/po171205.pdf](https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a4464/f9/po171205.pdf), [30 October 2019].

helped and that halts their economic progress. While the Nazi occupation represented for Slovaks a unique chance for having and governing their own national state for the first time in history, from the Czech side the establishment of the Slovak State was perceived as opportunism without any solidarity with the Czech brothers.

In the second joint state between Czechs and Slovaks, these mutual grievances were mostly muted by the strict communist rule controlled from Moscow. Only after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 and the establishment of democratic government, the mutual differences and contradicting visions between Czechs and Slovaks showed, supported strongly by the personalities and worldviews of the new political elites on both sides. For Slovaks, the fall of communism created an opportunity for national emancipation and increased demand for having a larger say about their own issues and their future. On the other hand, the Czechs desired a joint Czechoslovak state, consolidated on the inside and united on the outside.

The first crisis emerged when the question of a name change was opened, removing the word "socialist" from the official state name, creating the Czechoslovak Republic. Slovaks saw this as an opportunity to pursue another change – inserting a hyphen in the word Czechoslovak (i.e. Czecho-Slovak Republic), returning thus to the first republic name in 1918 to 1920, stressing the federative nature of the state and equality between both entities. While this might seem as a minor issue, for Czechs and Slovaks this disagreement created a very serious discussion resulting in a several months lasting crisis. The following solution was offered by the Czechoslovak Parliament: the word Federative was added into the name (i.e. Czechoslovak Federative Republic) and the name was spelled without a hyphen in Czech and with it in Slovak. Eventually, this solution proved to be unacceptable to Slovak political elites as well and the final name was decided to be the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic, stressing even more explicitly the equality between Czechs and Slovaks.

These divergent visions became even clearer after the general elections of 1992. In Czech Republic, it was won by Civic Democratic Party (ODS) led by Václav Klaus, whilst in Slovakia the nationalist Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) was the most successful party, led by Vladimír Mečiar. Both of them became the prime ministers in their respective national governments. And while the former advocated for rapid privatisation and overall economic transformation while preserving the federative state model, the latter wanted significantly slower economic transformation with state intervention and called for a confederative model. HZDS pursued an irreconcilable model of Slovak sovereignty and legal personality while remaining in one state with Czechs. Czechs on the other hand envisioned a federation with a strong federal government.

### **Best practices and lessons learned**

In the rather positive experience of the dissolution of the Czechoslovak state, free from any violence, several factors underpinning the relatively calm process can be identified



despite the eventual outcome depending on many other characteristics of the whole situation and its comparability with other cases, such as the dissolution of Yugoslavia, is limited. Regardless, some important conclusions can be made from the Czechoslovak experience.

### **Political decision without a referendum**

The paradox is that although voting very differently, the majority of both Czechs and Slovaks wished to stay in a unified state.<sup>27</sup> The dissolution agreed by elected leaders can be understood as an unintended consequence then. The Czechs and Slovaks had very different ideas about the nature of economic and political transformation of the state and the future establishment of relations within Czechoslovakia which were not compatible enough to be realized in one state unit.

From the fast agreement between prime ministers Klaus and Mečiar and the direction the separate countries headed then under their leadership, it seems that their own personalities and motivations contributed to the end of Czechoslovakia. Both men had a strong vision of their country's future (divergent from each other) and apparently understood that in a united Czechoslovakia, each of them has less political power to pursue this vision. But neither one of them openly called for the split at first and until this day, both say it was the other side pushing for separation.

As mentioned above, the opinion polls conducted at that time showed that majority of citizens in both parts of Czechoslovakia did not wish for the dissolution. The political elites were aware of this situation and thus avoided holding a referendum despite general demand for it (over 1 million Czechoslovaks signed a petition calling for a referendum<sup>28</sup>). Due to the absence of opportunity for the citizens to have a say in the decision of Czechoslovakia's future, this decision is sometimes criticized as illegitimate. However, the response of the leaders' standing behind it was that the citizens showed their preferences through the elections which brought Klaus and Mečiar to power and thus no referendum was needed. From later interviews with Klaus it is clear that they were worried the referendum's results would not support the breakup in at least one part of the federation and would thus complicate this problem even further.

The Slovak political scene was more divided on the topic, though. Except for the not very significant Movement for Czechoslovak Understanding, all of the subjects wanted at least a federation. Public Against Violence (VPN) that had overwhelmingly won the Slovak 1990

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<sup>27</sup> Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění, Sociologický ústav AV ČR, „Občané k rozdělení Československa před 10 lety“, [https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com\\_form2content/documents/c2/a239/f9/100151s\\_PO21227.pdf](https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a239/f9/100151s_PO21227.pdf), [30 October 2019] and Rozpad ČSFR: Většina lidí si ho nepřála, *Magazín M*, <https://www.em.muni.cz/tema/3272-rozpad-csfr-vetsina-lidi-si-ho-neprala>, [30 October 2019].

<sup>28</sup> Engelberg S., Czechoslovakia Breaks in Two, To Wide Regret, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/01/world/czechoslovakia-breaks-in-two-to-wide-regret.html?pagewanted=all>, [30 October 2019] and Patočka, J., Changing our country's name to Czechia won't solve the problems we face, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/18/czechia-name-change-czech-republic-problems-people-government>, [30 October 2019].

general elections called for a “partnership federation”. Further away was Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) with its leader Ján Čarnogurský that served as a Slovak Prime Minister from 1991 to 1992, wanting a somewhat looser-than-a-federation model and according to his words “a star on the EU flag for Slovakia”.<sup>29</sup> HZDS called for a confederation and with no surprise, the Slovak National Party (SNS) demanded full independence. This clearly shows that even inside one of the nations, the opinions on the future of Czechoslovakia were divided.

On the other hand, on the Czech side the political elites, apart from the Prime Minister, were much more convinced of preserving the federation with strong sentiments towards Czechoslovakia, resulting in Václav Havel’s resignation from the post of Czechoslovak President when the agreement on dissolution was reached between the two prime ministers. Also other political parties wanted to preserve the federation, although they differed in the degree to which they were willing to give in to Slovak demands, and Václav Klaus was often criticised by them for sealing the fate of the joint state. In general, it can be said that Czechs identified much more with the Czechoslovak state than Slovaks and the 1918 establishment of independent Czechoslovakia has a more significant and sentimental place in their history.

### **Well-managed technical division perceived as acceptable by both sides**

An important factor contributing to the overall good mutual relations between the two new states after the division was the nature of the technical division itself. Although at the beginning the Czech and Slovak side had different preferences in the formula according to which the Czechoslovak property was to be divided, eventually the negotiations were concluded with an agreement on the 2:1 division among Czechs and Slovaks according to the population and territory size.<sup>30</sup>

Another factor helping the smooth division was the relatively high homogeneity of the population in both parts of the federation, further supported by the signing of a number of agreements, including those enabling free movement of people and trade. All these factors made it easier for the populations to adapt to the new circumstances and hindered reasons for resistance from citizens.

Altogether, some 30 treaties were signed before the dissolution that were to govern future relation between two states. Both governments agreed on the creation of customs union which allowed duty-free exchange of goods and services, and on free movement of people. They also adopted common trade policies and tariffs, agreed on free movement

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<sup>29</sup> “Rozhovor prezidenta republiky o rozdělení Československa v knize „Jak praskaly švy“,“ <https://www.klaus.cz/clanky/2986>, [30 October 2019].

<sup>30</sup> Česko-slovenský rozvod. Spory o majetek trvaly sedm let, porcovaly se vlaky i letadla, *Český rozhlas*, <https://radiozurnal.rozhlas.cz/cesko-slovensky-rozvod-spory-o-majetek-trvaly-sedm-let-porcovaly-se-vlaky-i-7183253>, [30 October 2019].

of people and signed more treaties dealing with tax reforms, common borders, defence and even a short-lived monetary union.

There were also no issues with the border demarcation as Czechoslovakia had already been a federation and the borders had been clearly set. The number of agreements and good preparation of the dissolution itself, establishing the relations between the future separate states as very close regardless the division, set a solid base for friendly relations and acceptance of the division by all parts of the society.

What is, however, most important, is that the form of this technical division was perceived as legitimate and as a compromise by both sides, not leaving space for any deeper grievances and revisionism. The division was also seen as beneficial for both states. Especially in Slovakia, the division meant real independence for the first time in its history, giving Slovaks a chance to decide about their lives themselves. On the Czech side, the division met with more sentiment and nostalgia, both from the population and political elites. However, for the governing party and especially Prime Minister Klaus it was eventually beneficial, giving him the autonomy needed for implementation of rapid economic transformation which was his personal goal he put high importance on.

### **Mutual respect and constructive public discourse**

When analysing the dissolution of Czechoslovakia and the factors which contributed to its peacefulness, the rhetoric and discourse spread by political elites regarding the split and the other part of federation cannot be overlooked. During negotiations between the Prime Ministers Klaus and Mečiar, both during the dissolution process and after the division, the relations between Czechs and Slovaks remained calm and rather amicable. Both Prime Ministers spoke about each other with respect and neither they nor the rest of the political elites in either country tried to drive a wedge between or spread hatred among Czechs and Slovaks.

This very pragmatic and constructive approach to the dissolution by the political elites, without igniting negative sentiments towards the other nation among the general public, played well into the already overall good, despite above-mentioned issues and disagreements, mutual relations between Czechs and Slovaks. The responsible and constructive discourse created by politicians is something notable and rare when compared especially to the situation in former Yugoslavia or even Western Balkans nowadays. Instead of igniting the potential nationalist sentiments and grievances (existing especially among Slovaks) or the feelings of betrayal from their federation partner, present to some extent among Czechs, the leaders of Czechoslovakia chose the other way.

## **Conclusions and lessons for the Western Balkans**

Several conclusions can be drawn from studying the case of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. Firstly, the dissolution process showed that whether a state survives as one entity or breaks down mainly depends on the political elites, not the masses. One can pinpoint specific decisions done by political elites that irreversibly stirred the dissolution process. One of them was even to leave out the public and omit referendum. The role of political elites and their influence over the general public through the discourse they create is also important, as they can either mitigate the existing potential for interethnic tensions or, on the other hand, further enhance it and exploit it for their own gains. Not only in the time period leading up to dissolution of Czechoslovakia and during the breakup but also the developments of mutual relations later on showed that despite the large portion of shared history and geographical, historical, cultural and ideological closeness, the relations between the Czech Republic and Slovakia have been significantly dependent on the political leadership at that time. While under the government led by Klaus in the 1990s, there was a strong tendency to break away not only from Slovakia but also the rest of the Visegrad countries, and to be the frontrunner in the process of Euro-Atlantic integration. On the other hand, the government led by Miloš Zeman who became the Prime Minister in 1998, showed much more solidarity to Slovakia and the support from the Czech Republic, as well as renewed Visegrad cooperation, contributed to Slovakia being able to catch up with its partners and join the EU together with them in 2004.

Second lesson to be considered is the high importance of the role of political institutions when dealing with the possible dissolution of a state along the ethnic lines. It is because these can either exacerbate or ameliorate the issue, depending on their quality. Well-built democratic institutions have the potential to provide the best tools to contain ethnic tensions. Unlike in undemocratic regimes dominated by one ethnic group, democracy and strong functioning democratic institutions, when set up keeping in mind the existing ethnic divisions and the necessity of their overcoming, can offer every ethnic group proper representation, adequate inclusion in decision making and a sense of an equal status with other groups. When all ethnic groups feel their participation in a democratic process is important and that they have a say in the matters relevant to them, the grounds for feelings of resentment towards other ethnic groups are reduced. This can be done by building robust, impartial and just democratic institutions that support real inclusion and cooperation instead of divisions and separation.

On the other hand, when the institutions are not so well-built or are weak, they easily allow for the ethnic tensions to grow. At the same time, the flawed federation set up from 1968 showed that while too much centralisation is not desirable in democratic federations, a federation model with unclear division of powers and strong republican governments is not feasible either, especially in a newly democratic state.

In terms of establishing good mutual relations and mitigating nationalist tensions, political elites from both entities and their approach towards each other, as well as the public discourse they create, is of key importance. When politicians from both sides speak about

each other and the other nation with at least basic respect and understanding, it has a mitigating effect on the existing potential for interethnic tensions. Even in the case of Czechoslovakia, the mutual grievances could have been easily exploited by opportunistic politicians (and to some extent they were by Mečiar with the Slovak sovereignty concept prior to 1992 elections), stirring up the interethnic tensions. In these situations, however, responsible political leadership that pursues mutually accepted and peaceful solutions and a continuous constructive dialog is necessary. This is a very important lesson especially for the Western Balkans where up to now most of political leaders act rather in an irresponsible way, using the existing resentment in the society for their own political gains instead of showing real effort to overcome the existing tensions and divisions.

From the case of Czechoslovakia, regardless of its specific circumstances, the conclusion can be drawn that open, frequent and respectful communication in combination with a responsible political leadership that keeps its country's long-term best interests at heart, rather than only short-term political wins, create good conditions for settling disputes and mutual tensions. This applies not only to malfunctioning federations but also to Western Balkan states and their mutual regional cooperation. In case of existing bilateral disputes, a lasting mutually accepted solution must be pursued through open, intense and respectful communication between both sides, instead of short-term political gains.

# Slovak-Hungarian reconciliation and lessons for the Western Balkans

*Nikolett Garai, Tomáš Strážay*

## Introduction

Slovak-Hungarian relations have constantly been the most sensitive in the V4. The relationship between Slovakia and Hungary was problematic already in the 1990s even though the fall of communist regimes in Central Europe and the prospects of integration in Euro-Atlantic structures promised the possibility of a new era of reconciliation. It became evident that membership of multi-lateral platforms - like the EU or V4 - alone could not be the panacea solving all problematic issues between Slovakia and Hungary as tensions continued to be exacerbated after the EU accession while V4 cooperation deliberately avoided sensitive bilateral issues.

The parliamentary elections in Hungary and Slovakia in 2010 changed the political situation and overall climate in both countries. However, it can be argued that the improvement in bilateral relations is based more on the changed rhetoric and style of communication than on a real reconciliation process. Additional political will and maintenance of a consensual approach remain necessary preconditions for solving existing problems and dismantling deeply rooted ethnic stereotypes which arise from different and selective historical narratives, collective memory and changing the status quo.

In the first part, the paper provides a brief overview of the most problematic issues in Slovak-Hungarian bilateral relations in the context of last thirty years. Secondly, various governmental initiatives and non-governmental reconciliation efforts are evaluated. Finally, the paper aims to summarize the most important prerequisites for the future development of Slovak-Hungarian relations and offers some lessons learned, as well as recommendations for Western Balkan countries.

## A brief overview of Slovak-Hungarian bilateral relations

Apart from deeply rooted prejudices and stereotypes resulting from a more than one-thousand-year long coexistence of the Hungarians and Slovaks in one state, most of the tensions in bilateral relations relate to the status of the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia. After the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993, Slovakia became the only country in Central Europe with a significant number of ethnic minorities. The Hungarian minority is not just the biggest minority living on the territory of Slovakia, representing around 8,5 % of the total population according to the 2011 census<sup>31</sup>, but the only one having relevant

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<sup>31</sup> Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, "Population by nationality – 2011, 2001, 1991",

political representation in the parliament, and, from time to time, also in the state apparatus.<sup>32</sup> The status of the Hungarian minority and its loyalty to the Slovak state was considered to be among one of the most complicated political issues in Slovakia in the course of transformation. Due to conflicting national narratives that persist today in Slovak and Hungarian societies, endeavors to maintain and build relations between ethnic Hungarians and the kin state were viewed with suspicion in political circles. These narratives still have a great impact on collective identities of both sides making it hard to overcome fears and anxieties.

On the other hand, the status of Hungarian minorities living abroad, especially in neighboring countries, has been one of the most important political issues in Hungary; also due to the fact that the support for Hungarian minorities abroad is embedded directly in the Hungarian constitution, while the protection of interests of Hungarian minorities as an element of regional policy has remained one of the priorities of the Hungarian foreign policy ever since the first democratically elected government after the regime change.

After the split of Czechoslovakia, the relationship between the Slovak majority and Hungarian minority had to reflect the new geopolitical situation. At first, meetings on the highest political level bloomed and there have been 30 presidential, prime-ministerial, ministerial and state secretarial meetings between January 1993 and May 1994.<sup>33</sup> However, after the initial enthusiasm, the complexity of problematic issues and lack of interest from both sides halted the reconciliatory efforts. The then-Prime Minister Mečiar's government opted for an ethnocentric model of a state that places one ethnic group/nationality before another. Although Mečiar and his collaborators were defeated by a democratic coalition, including also Strana maďarskej koalície/Magyar Koalíció Pártja, in 1998, even the two succeeding governments led by Dzurinda were not always free from ethnic tensions. The participation of an openly nationalist and anti-Hungarian Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana - SNS) in the first Fico's government (2006-2010) and legitimization of its program by coalition partners was considered as a step back by the representatives of the Hungarian minority, as well as the Hungarian government. The issue of the amendment of the Act on the State Language from 2009 was considered to be a symbolic 'top of the iceberg' by the critics of the Robert Fico government in Hungary, as well as in Slovakia. In addition, bilateral relations between Slovakia and Hungary were poisoned by several representatives of the ruling coalition openly voicing anti-Hungarian statements.

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[https://slovak.statistics.sk/wps/wcm/connect/bd447dc5-c417-48d6-89e1-0a2d60053cf6/Table\\_10\\_Population\\_by\\_nationality\\_2011\\_2001\\_1991.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=kojGfKx&CVID=kojGfKx&CVID=kojGfKx](https://slovak.statistics.sk/wps/wcm/connect/bd447dc5-c417-48d6-89e1-0a2d60053cf6/Table_10_Population_by_nationality_2011_2001_1991.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=kojGfKx&CVID=kojGfKx&CVID=kojGfKx), [2 November 2019].

<sup>32</sup> In the past, the Party of Hungarian Coalition – Strana maďarskej koalície/Magyar Koalíció Pártja, had represented the interests of the Hungarian minority. After the 2010 parliamentary elections, however, SMK (then renamed to the Party of Hungarian Community/Magyar Közösség Pártja) did not enter the parliament. Most votes from the Hungarian voters went to the Most-Híd party, which declared itself as the first party bridging gaps between the Slovaks and Hungarians.

<sup>33</sup> Boros F., *A magyar-szlovák kérdés történeti kontextusban*, Hantken, Budapest, 2011.

Hungarian ruling elites have also contributed to the deterioration of bilateral relations with Slovakia; the lack of political empathy and support for unilateral action can be viewed as one of the most fundamental mistakes from Hungary's side. It was the first Orbán's government who established institutional links with Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries. The launching of the Standing Hungarian Conference in 1999, supposed to provide the representatives of Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries a direct opportunity for consultations with the institutions of the Hungarian state, was viewed with suspicion on the Slovak side. The passing of the Hungarian Status Act was considered to be another attempt at bringing the Hungarians closer to their kin state and therefore it was rejected in Slovakia. The establishment of the Forum of MPs of the Carpathian Basin by the Hungarian Parliament, which provided the Hungarian parliament with a direct instrument for communication with deputies of other national parliaments, was categorically rejected by Slovakia – the argument was that Hungary should not build institutional links with deputies elected in other countries. Although the first attempt to launch a double citizenship law in 2004 was not successful, the new FIDESZ-led government took the opportunity and passed the law only a few weeks after the May 2010 elections – doing so without consulting the governments of the neighboring countries. Slovak government reacted with the amendment of the citizenship law which in fact takes away the Slovak citizenship from a person holding citizenship of another country.

Some other issues from more distant past between Hungary and Slovakia also remain unresolved – the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros case, dating back to 1977, is a well-known example. Although this joint hydro energetic power plant over Danube had been meant to become an example of good bilateral relations between (back then) Czechoslovakia and Hungary, it became one of the most divisive issues instead. Despite the International Court had ruled on the case years ago and the whole issue was passed to relevant experts, the ruling of the Court has still not been implemented.

The change in communication style between Slovakia and Hungary was brought about with the government led by PM Radičová in 2010. Although the government survived only two years, the following second and third Fico government continued similar policy towards national minorities. In years 2010-2012 and again after 2016 one of the parties representing Hungarian community – Most-Híd – has been an integral part of the government coalition.

Several achievements regarding the status of the Hungarian community in Slovakia have been achieved after 2016. Above all, a law on financing minority cultures was drafted and passed. The newly elected president Zuzana Čaputová seems to continue policy respectful towards minorities, since she – as the first Slovak president - invited two representatives of the Hungarian community to her team of external expert advisors. A symbolic gesture towards the Hungarian minority was also her attendance at the Gombaszög Summer University which had not been attended by previous heads of state despite the organizers' invitation.



Increase in trade exchange between Slovakia and Hungary has also strengthened the spirit of cooperation. For Hungary, Slovakia is the third most important trade partner, while for Slovakia, Hungary ranks fourth on the list of trade partners.

### **Reconciliation efforts**

In this part, selected substantial initiatives – both governmental and non-governmental – contributing to the reconciliation between Slovakia and Hungary will be described.

***The Treaty between the Slovak Republic and the Republic of Hungary*** on good neighborly relations and friendly cooperation was signed in Paris in March 1995, and as such was a part of a broader initiative of the Stability Pact. By signing the Treaty, both Slovakia and Hungary declared their desire to be integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures, while good neighborly relations were considered one of the most important prerequisites for their integration into the EU and NATO. The Treaty was the first important bilateral document in the new history of Slovak-Hungarian relations and remains to be the most complex document between Slovakia and Hungary until today. The most problematic issues associated with the Treaty do not concern its content, but implementation. This also applies to bilateral Mixed Commissions, designed as necessary instruments for the implementation of particular paragraphs of the Treaty.<sup>34</sup> The instrument of these commissions has not been exploited sufficiently and some commissions failed to meet the expectations related to the regularity of their meetings and achieved results.

The ***inclusion of Hungarian community representatives in the country's government*** might establish a good base for the future cooperation between the Slovak and Hungarian political parties. On the other hand, the experience from years 1998-2006 shows that the participation of the representatives of the Hungarian community alone is not sufficient to solve all problems and bridge all the gaps between the two nations and other steps contributing to improvement of interethnic dialogue need to be undertaken.

The list of governmental and non-governmental initiatives leading to the improvement of bilateral relations would include several projects, some of them listed below. Unfortunately, they have not been fully implemented or, despite their great symbolic value, have simply been forgotten or neglected.

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<sup>34</sup> The Mixed Commissions focused on the following areas: 1. European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, 2. Military and other Security Issues, 3. Economic Cooperation, 4. Environmental Protection, 5. Transport and Infrastructure, 6. Cultural Issues and Print Media, 7. Health, Health Insurance and Social Care, 8. Internal Affairs, 9. Education, Science, Sports and Youth, 10. Cross-border Cooperation, 11. Agriculture, Veterinary and Phytosanitary Care, 12. National Minorities.

### Joint Sessions of the Committees of National Parliaments

One of the consequences of the increased tensions in bilateral relations during the first Fico government was an initiative of the heads of the national parliaments. In December 2008 they initiated joint meetings of committees of national parliaments as another instrument for development of bilateral relations. Through these meetings, the MPs of the National Council of the Slovak Republic and Hungarian National Assembly were supposed to discuss and possibly find solutions for some of the problems in bilateral relations.

### Common Past, Common Future in the Mirror of Common Projects

On 14 June 2007 the Prime Ministers Robert Fico and Ferenc Gyurcsány agreed on a document entitled *Common past, common future in the Mirror of Common Projects*<sup>35</sup>. The document encompassed fourteen points and reflected different forms of cooperation, including economic and cultural cooperation. The Prime Ministers declared that all fourteen points represented projects that were achievable in the foreseeable future.

Despite the list of priority projects from the *Common Past, Common Future* document contains only non-conflict issues, there has been a significant delay in their implementation. Therefore, the Prime Ministers met again in September 2009 and issued a joint statement, which was basically summarized in 11 points<sup>36</sup>. In one of the points the Prime Ministers again stressed the need to reconvene in meetings of all Mixed Commissions for implementation of the Treaty of 1995. The Prime Ministers also entrusted the Ministers of Foreign Affairs to prepare an enhanced cooperation package for the consideration of the heads of governments that would propose the establishment of the Hungarian-Slovak Cooperation Council as a non-political independent consultative body fostering cooperation between the two countries. Another role of the Council would have been to supervise the planned Hungarian-Slovak Cooperation Fund, which was aimed at supporting projects, scholarship and student exchange programs, as well as cultural, arts and sports events focusing on promoting Hungarian-Slovak cohabitation and cooperation.

It can be argued that most of the tasks included in the two above mentioned documents, including the establishment of the Hungarian-Slovak Cooperation Council and Cooperation Fund, had not been fulfilled yet.

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<sup>35</sup> Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky, "Informácia o priebehu a výsledkoch pracovného stretnutia predsedov vlád SR a MR v Bratislave dňa 18.6.2007", [www.rokovania.sk/File.aspx/ViewDocumentHtml/Mater-Dokum-66229?prefixFile=m\\_](http://www.rokovania.sk/File.aspx/ViewDocumentHtml/Mater-Dokum-66229?prefixFile=m_), [3 November 2019].

<sup>36</sup> Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky, "Meeting between Gordon Bajnai, Hungarian prime Minister, and Robert Fico, Slovak Prime Minister in Szécsény, Hungary", <http://www.sfm.vlada.gov.sk/17200/spolocne-stanovisko-roberta-fica-a-gordona-bajnaia.php>, [3 November 2019].

### Good Neighborhood and Understanding Prize

Another symbolic initiative supporting the standardization and development of bilateral relations is the establishment of a new tradition of the prize entitled 'Good Neighborhood and Understanding' to one individual or community in each country to honour their outstanding contributions to the Slovak-Hungarian cooperation. Such a prize was initiated by the former foreign ministers Ján Kubiš and Kinga Göncz in 2008 and has been awarded annually until 2013.

### Reconciliation Initiative of the Catholic Bishops

The process of reconciliation between the Slovak and Hungarian Catholic Church began symbolically in the town of Esztergom in 2006. During their meeting and joint celebration of the mass the Slovak and Hungarian bishops issued official letters in which they apologized for their deeds in the past and asked for forgiveness. Despite the mass being attended by many worshippers from both countries, the initiative was not followed by any political declaration and was only poorly reflected in national media. The Bishops took the initiative once again in 2008, when they publicly called for understanding between the two nations and rejected any form of violence and extremism.

### Round Table of Hungarians in Slovakia

The establishment of the Round Table was initiated by the South-Slovakian Civic Information Network at the Civic Forum Conference in 2008 held in Šamorín/Somorja. The Round Table is an open, independent, non-partisan, voluntary and informal institution, functioning as an umbrella platform for organizations and esteemed personalities of the Hungarian community in Slovakia. Any cultural, self-governmental, state-run or non-governmental organization (or institution) can participate in the national meetings of the Round Table, which, among other formal criteria, should act in the interest of the Hungarian community in Slovakia, foster minority culture, education and identity, and should be ready to share responsibility for the development of the community and support its advocacy.

### Forum Minority Research Institute

The Forum Minority Research Institute was founded in 1996. At present, the Institute is located in Šamorín/Somorja, south Slovakia. Its primary objective is to carry out complex studies on the situation and culture of the national minorities in Slovakia, as well as documenting their written and even more extensive heritage. As a non-profit organization, the Institute operates as a public and service institute. The Institute hosts a resource center with Bibliotheca Hungarica, Hungarian Archives of Slovakia and the Centre for Digitalization and Internet Databases. The Institute undertakes various policy

research, publishes books and journals, organizes different seminars, training courses and conferences on various topics.<sup>37</sup>

### Slovak-Hungarian European Forum and Slovak-Hungarian Discussion Forum

The main goal of the project coordinated by the Slovak Foreign Policy Association in cooperation with the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs between 2007 – 2012 was to contribute to the identification of common interests of Slovakia and Hungary and their application at the European, regional, as well as bilateral level. One of the aims was to contribute to the demythologization and qualitative change in bilateral relations between Slovakia and Hungary, by developing a regular and structured dialogue of experts and civil society in general.

In 2013, the initiative was renamed to Slovak-Hungarian Discussion Forum and acquired the financial support from the grant scheme of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs. The first session of the Slovak-Hungarian Discussion Forum with participation of the representatives of both ministries of foreign affairs and think tank communities was held in 2013, followed by two more meetings in 2014 and 2015. Currently the project is on hold, since none of the stakeholders involved feel an urgent need to organize a common session.

### Joint History Textbook

An important initiative connected to the work of the Slovak-Hungarian Commission of Historians is the development of a joint history textbook, which is supposed to describe chronologically 15 historical periods. The aim of such a textbook is not to replace current history textbooks, but to serve as an additional source of information for students and teachers at different stages of the educational process. Each of the fifteen chapters is supposed to be prepared by one Slovak and one Hungarian historian, while the two authors are also expected to agree on a common summary. However, the project has not been successfully implemented yet. The main institutional and expert sponsors of the project are the Slovak and Hungarian Academies of Sciences.

There are several other good non-governmental cultural initiatives like the cooperation between the Hungarian Writers' Association and its counterpart in Slovakia. In 2019, they agreed on the mutual and regular translation of contemporary Slovak and Hungarian literature in the form of journals, anthologies, and in individual volumes.

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<sup>37</sup> The Forum Minority Research Institute, [www.foruminst.sk](http://www.foruminst.sk)

## **Main findings and lessons learned**

In the past, the Slovak-Hungarian reconciliation has often been perceived as a single act that can be reached by one political declaration or agreement. It has to be underlined that the reconciliation is a longitudinal process and, in some aspects, it may take several years to reach the first satisfactory, conclusive, results. Therefore, adequate and continuous support by the representatives of both countries, going beyond political rhetoric, is a necessary precondition.

Experience from the last (almost) thirty years shows that at the political level, unilateral actions prevailed over joint initiatives. Even though the latter appeared in political statements and declarations, the vast majority of them have not been implemented.

Despite all the initiatives, programs and projects neither the governments, nor non-governmental actors have succeeded in the implementation of a reconciliation process between Slovakia and Hungary. It can therefore be concluded that the reconciliation process requires a new approach both on the governmental and non-governmental side. Special attention needs to be paid to the role and opportunities of the next generations of young people who could be the vanguards of reconciliation processes.

Past development showed that neither the left-wing nor right-wing governments supported the reconciliation process between Slovakia and Hungary in a convincing way. It can be argued that ethnicity turned out to be a more important factor than ideological closeness or differences.

The Treaty of 1995 can be considered an appropriate legislation framework for the development of Slovak-Hungarian relations; however, all its paragraphs need to be implemented in a continuous and systematic way. The creation of joint intergovernmental committees could be a good practice to foster cooperation, however, only if decisions are followed by proper implementation.

The improvement of civil dialogue and intensification of cooperation between various non-governmental organisations remains one of the preconditions for the development of Slovak-Hungarian relations. Currently, some of the initiatives led by NGOs lack continuity, while others overlap in activities. Another important task is the creation of an independent Slovak-Hungarian cooperation council and fund that would support projects aiming at the improvement of Slovak-Hungarian dialogue.

Due to different historical and structural conditions, foreign examples of reconciliation, such as the Franco-German or Polish-German reconciliation, are applicable only partially. A study group consisting of local experts could be established in order to evaluate possibilities of a know-how and experience transfer.

Despite remaining problems and tensions, the Slovak-Hungarian relations also present many good examples, either at the bilateral or regional level of cooperation. What is also needed in the reconciliation process is a larger focus on the positive examples in mutual

relations; the overcoming of divisions can boost cooperation in existing areas and create space for new initiatives – both at governmental and NGO levels.

### **Recommendations for Western Balkan countries**

In the light of the above, the following recommendations can be put forward:

- Intensify official political dialogue at all levels and avoid unilateral action unless these are consulted with partners from the partner country, avoid adopting legislation that interferes with legal systems in neighboring countries without consulting them.
- Create and regularly update the list of priority cooperation areas and start implementing them without delay.
- Consider how young people can be involved from both sides into reconciliation activities.
- Avoid thinking of the EU membership as the solution for bilateral disputes and problems.
- Consider involvement of independent, third-party experts in consultations in case of prolonged unresolved problems and issues.
- Support civil society activities in both countries through the establishment of bilateral cooperation councils and cooperation funds.
- Support development of cross-border initiatives and create favorable conditions for development of cooperation at regional and local levels.
- Enhance economic cooperation at all levels.
- Guarantee rights of minorities and avoid any discriminatory tendencies along an ethnic basis.
- Create a favorable environment for multicultural education.
- Avoid overlapping initiatives and splitting resources.

# Overcoming the legacies of the past together: Serbia and Hungary

*Igor Novakovic, Anna Orosz*

## Introduction

Hungary and Serbia have a shared history which can be characterized by both cooperation and conflict. In the center of the most recent debates has been the territory known since mid-19<sup>th</sup> century as Vojvodina that was ceded from Hungary<sup>38</sup> after World War I as a consequence of the Trianon Treaty. The area – which usually enjoyed a special government status – over centuries experienced significant changes in the composition of the population either because of the Ottoman invasion or intended population settlements by the Austrian emperors and Hungarian leaders.

WWI and the decision in Trianon in 1920 had a major impact on the relation of Serbs and Hungarians living in that area. Hungary lost 71 percent of its territory and 59 percent of its population. This national trauma contributed to the revisionist efforts in the Hungarian foreign policy in the first period. At the same time the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes received the territory of Vojvodina with significant number of Hungarian inhabitants (appr. 28% of the population).

During WWII, Hungary regained control over Vojvodina with the support of the Nazi Germany and in January 1942 their military forces carried out a razzia against Partisans that was accompanied by mass killings of civilians, mainly against Serbs and Jews. As the war ended with the fall of Axis powers, Hungary again had to withdraw behind the Trianon borders. In 1944-45 the Partisans and Communist forces gained control over the Yugoslav territory and took revenge against their former enemies. The actions caused also massive civilian losses. Hungarians (and Germans) were executed based on collective punishment.

As part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Vojvodina gained a special status of autonomous province (Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, hereafter APV) with wide range of rights and authorities. After Tito's death, Slobodan Milosevic fostered centralization and he cut the province's rights and privileges that also partially restricted the rights of the Hungarian community (for example in education). The wars in former Yugoslavia and growing nationalism undermined the ground of peaceful coexistence. The dissolution of former Yugoslavia and the "loss" of Kosovo became a Trianon-like trauma for Serbs and contributed to an increased suspicion also against the Hungarian minority, one of the most organized ethnic groups in Serbia living right next to the border of their motherland. Unfortunately, growing nationalism among Serbs also led to some ethnic clashes with Hungarians, raising concerns of the Hungarian governments. The first freely elected Hungarian government determined Hungarian minority protection as one of the main pillars of its foreign policy, but it also respected the internationally defined borders

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<sup>38</sup> Together with other territories (Slovakia, Ruthenia, Transylvania, Eastern (Temes) Banate, Croatia and parts of Austria).

and rather supported relations with the Hungarian minority communities under the umbrella of Euro-Atlantic integration process.

After the change of regime in Serbia, the choice of the European path as the strategic priority was a game changer in the relations. The Hungarian foreign policy considers the Euro-Atlantic integration of Serbia and the wider Western Balkan region to be the guarantee of peace and security for the region and for Hungary as well. Thus, Hungary strongly supports Serbia's accession to Euro-Atlantic structures and building friendly relationship became a common interest of the two countries. Interestingly, two right-wing parties managed to build strong intergovernmental relations and high-level symbolic acts recognizing former atrocities on both sides took place. Since then intergovernmental cooperation reached the highest level in history, contributing to the development of economic relations too. However, the cooperation of the Hungarian community with Serbs should be further developed in order to strengthen the social ground of reconciliation.

### **Best practices and lessons learned**

The reconciliation process between Serbia and Hungary was lately supported by several factors: a) the significant amount of time that elapsed since the last conflict; b) the existence of Hungarian/Serbian minority in Serbia/Hungary and the improving minority rights frameworks; c) the process of the EU integration; and d) friendly relations of the elites running both states based on common interests.

#### Time doesn't solve problems but helps to heal wounds

The last major conflicts between Hungarians and Serbs that were accompanied by massive human losses as a consequence of ethnic based violence happened in the mid-1940s so more than half century has passed without major conflicts between the two countries. This time also helped the Hungarian political elites and society (at least the large majority) to overcome the Trianon syndrome so revisionist approach could not return to the Hungarian foreign policy after the change of regime in the beginning of the 1990s which was essential for building trust between the two countries. Furthermore, as the time passes, the number of people who were directly affected by those atrocities is decreasing which ease the circumstances of the reconciliation process.

#### Minority protection in Hungary and Serbia, and the position of the Hungarian minority

The war in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s resulted in "etnification" of general politics and thus, the deterioration of approach towards minorities in Serbia, which was seen as a potential factor of instability. The Hungarian governments were worried about the worsening situation of the Hungarian national minority in Serbia during this period



and that became a main bottleneck for improving bilateral relations. Hence, the first step for the reconciliation between the two states and two peoples was the change in minority policies in Serbia and the continuation of the improvement of the general framework for minorities in Hungary, as well as the full participation of the minority elites in the political system of the country.

The change of regime in Hungary and the Euro-Atlantic integration process provided a positive atmosphere for developing the minority policy framework in Hungary. The Democratic Alliance of Serbs was actively involved in the preparation of the Law on National and Ethnic Minorities (adopted in 1993) which also facilitated the establishment of minority self-governments at national and municipality levels. In 1995 the national level Serbian Minority Self-Government was founded. As a result of the elections in 1998, 34 local level self-governments were formed in Budapest and on the county-side. In the period of 2014-2019 the number of those has been 45. The cultural and educational rights of the Serbs along with the other recognized national minorities have been granted. In the preservation of Serbian culture, the Serbian Orthodox Church in Hungary plays an important role. The legal framework of parliamentary representation of the national minorities was only set in 2010. In line with the new Election Law the national minorities can have a delegate in the Hungarian National Assembly.

The general course for shaping of the framework for minority protection in Serbia was set up in early 2000s, after the fall of the regime of Slobodan Milosevic. As the first step, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) finally ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter on Regional and Minority Language, and in the following years signed several bilateral agreements for protection of minority rights with the neighboring countries including Hungary. The current system of protection of national minorities is based on the 2002 Law on Protection of National Minorities (amended in 2009 and 2013), 2006 Constitution, 2009 Law on National Councils of National Minorities (amended in 2014) and the 2009 Anti-Discrimination Act (2009). Serbia has also adopted a number of laws that further defined some of the rights of national minorities including the Law on the Official Use of Language and Script, 2009 Law on Culture, 2009 Law on Textbooks and other Teaching Materials etc. The democratic turn in Serbia also allowed the adoption of the Bilateral Agreement on Minority Protection between Hungary and Serbia in 2003.

The Constitution and Laws provided specific regulations for national minorities to ensure a complete equality and to help them to preserve their identity. They defined that national minorities enjoy collective autonomy in the following areas: a) culture: national minorities have the right to “establish specific cultural, artistic and scientific institutions, societies and associations; b) education: right to education in their own mother language at the “pre-school, primary and secondary education levels.” c) information: the right to full and impartial information in their native language, and the state is obliged to provide “information, cultural and educational contents;” d) official use of language and script: in municipalities where national minorities constitute more than 15% of population there

language and script minority language could become official.<sup>39</sup> National minority councils (NMCs), elected by the respective minority they represent, are the bodies tasked with decision making in this areas. At the local, provincial and state level elections, parties registered as national minority parties enjoy positive discrimination, as they can get at least one seat if their list reaches the “natural threshold” (total turnout number divided with the number of mandates in the local, provincial or state assembly) instead of the regular threshold of 5 percent.

According to the census in 2011, the number of Hungarians were around 250 thousand (3.53 percent of total population, or 13 percent of the population of Vojvodina) in Serbia who predominantly live in Vojvodina.<sup>40</sup> The Hungarian minority in Serbia is one of the best organized and with the best connection with the central authorities. For almost two decades their representatives participate in almost all ruling majorities at the state level and the level of the Province of Vojvodina, and in a number of municipalities in AP Vojvodina, allowing them to significantly influence drafting and major changes in acts that regulate the minority protection framework in Serbia. The first Hungarian NMC was elected in 2002 by an electors committee, while the first direct elections were held in 2010. Legal framework has been further improved as result of the EU integration process and pressure coming from EU member states, including Hungary (see below).

While these improvements are welcomed on both sides, the current regulation framework could form the basis for segregation. The minority policy should also encourage integration of minorities into the wider society so there is still space for development. One of the best methods is to find solutions for implementing intercultural approach within the minority policies, which would make a process as a two-way path (i.e. engaging both minority and majority) for the full implementation of minority policies and standards. This approach has been actively advocated by the civil society in Serbia.

### Post-2008 cooperation – EU integration of Serbia and beyond

Serbia-Hungary relations improved after the 2000 regime change in Belgrade, and they were steadily growing, despite the few “hiccups” due to interethnic incidents in Vojvodina<sup>41</sup>, lack of understanding regarding the interpretation of certain historical events,<sup>42</sup> and unclear notions that Vojvodina Hungarians could demand a territorial

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<sup>39</sup> In the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, individual settlements, parts of municipalities, can achieve this if there is 25% percent of minority population.

<sup>40</sup> Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, “2011 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Serbia”, Belgrade 2014, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2014/PdfE/G20144012.pdf>, [1 November 2019].

<sup>41</sup> For example, Vukmirović, Đ., and Preradović Lj.. “Nacionalni sukobi tresu Temerin.” *Vecernje Novosti*, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/aktuelno.69.html:346843-Nacionalni-sukobi-tresu-Temerin>, [September 4, 2019].

<sup>42</sup> For example, when the Hungarian President was asked not to participate at the celebration of 1848 Revolution organized by the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians. See “Tadić i Šoljom naljutili vojvođanske Mađare.” *Autonomija*, <http://www.autonomija.info/tadic-i-soljom-naljutili-vojvodanske-madare.html>, [September 4, 2019]. The other example is the renewed trial of Sandor Kepiro, a former Hungarian military officer who participated in the war atrocities (according to the court rulings in 1940s, during Horthy's regime) in the city of Novi Sad in 1942, who was declared innocent by the first instance court in 2011. Serbian officials, the mayor of Novi Sad in particular, were displeased with such a decision.

autonomy in 8 (or 10, depending on the version) municipalities in the north of Serbia where they constitute a majority.<sup>43</sup> However, due to the 2008 proclamation of independence of Kosovo and its Hungarian recognition, the relations reached the lowest level in years. However, the two countries overcame the crisis soon through pragmatic approach to cooperation, based on the EU integration, urge for good neighborly relations and security concerns. Serbia, which was at the time seeking to become the EU candidate needed the Hungarian support. One of the first steps was a bilateral defense and security agreement which outlined the framework for cooperation in this area and immediately resulted in Serbia's joining the Hungarian-Slovak peacekeeping mission in Cyprus. Also, it was the foundation for joint military exercises, and to this date of all NATO member states, Serbia had the highest number of bilateral exercises with Hungary and Romania. During its 2011 EU presidency, Hungary was very supportive of Serbia's EU bid, which opened the way for obtaining the status of the EU candidate in 2012. Serbia also supported drafting of the Danube Strategy. Cross-border cooperation between the two states within the EU framework is very active and most of the funds are usually utilized.

Still, Hungary's support was not unconditional, as it depended on Serbia's implementation of its minority policy framework and the approach to Hungarian minority in general. For instance, Hungary conditioned Serbia's candidacy in 2012 with the changes in the draft Law on the Restitution of Collectivised Property between 1945-1965 or Payment of Damages, insisting that it cannot apply the principle of collective punishment which, in this case, was supposed to be applied to almost the entire population of ethnic Hungarians in Serbia. The solution was eventually found through bilateral political consultations. The second example is that Hungary, together with Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania, pushed for the special mechanism regarding the protection of minorities in Serbia within the Chapter 23 (Judiciary and fundamental rights.), which resulted in the creation of the special Action plan for the implementation of the rights of minorities. Serbia adopted the Action plan in 2016 and began its implementation, in coordination with the national minority councils.

### Strengthening inter-governmental and inter-party cooperation

The major breakthrough came after the advance of the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*, SNS) to the power in Serbia, and with the slow forging of their partnership with the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (*Savez vojvođanskih Mađara*, SVM), the biggest minority party in Serbia. It seems that SVM has played a key role in establishing links between Fidesz (ruling party in Hungary since Spring 2010) and SNS already in 2010.<sup>44</sup>

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See Zori, Ognjen. "Presuda Kepiru šokantna, najavljene žalbe." *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, [https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/presuda\\_kepiru\\_sokantna\\_najavljene\\_zalbe/24270357.html](https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/presuda_kepiru_sokantna_najavljene_zalbe/24270357.html), [September 4, 2019].

<sup>43</sup> See "Vojvođanski Mađari o autonomiji Vojvodine." *Autonomija*, <https://www.autonomija.info/vojvodanski-madari-o-autonomiji-vojvodine.html>, [September 4, 2019].

<sup>44</sup> Laketić, M. "Pastor i Nikolić zajedno u Budimpešti." *Blic.rs*, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/pastor-i-nikolic-zajedno-u-budimpesti/j82sk14>. [September 4, 2019]. In that moment, SVM was mostly in coalitions (local, provincial and state level) with the Democratic Party in Serbia, their long-term partner. However, there was a noticeable trend of transformation of SVM from officially social democratic to center right party which paved the way for closeness with both Fidesz and SNS.

This early brokering of the understanding between Fidesz and SNS soon bared the fruits, when SNS took power in Serbia. SVM did not participate in the first SNS government mostly due to lack of understanding between SNS and other coalition partners, but the two parties already formed a partnership, and SVM and SNS were together in the government following all next elections.

What was hard for the liberal governments to adopt, two right-wing leaders, prime minister/president Aleksandar Vucic and prime minister Viktor Orban quickly achieved. The two heads of state Janos Ader and Tomislav Nikolic met in Budapest in November 2012 where they announced a new beginning of relationships and discussed also sensitive issues like the case of boys of Temerin<sup>45</sup>. Already in June 2013, the Parliament of Serbia passed Declaration condemning the acts against the civilian Hungarian population in Vojvodina, committed from 1944 to 1945. Couple of days later, Janos Ader, the President of Hungary, held a speech in the Serbian Parliament condemning also atrocities carried out by the Hungarian militias against Serb civilians in the WWII.<sup>46</sup> Since then, several commemorations and honors took place with the participation of high level representatives of both states. Viktor Orban opened a cultural center in Belgrade in 2014. These symbolic acts opened a path for reconciliation between the elites of the two states, as well as for close cooperation between the two governments.

Symbolic acts were followed by enhanced cooperation between governments. Since 2014 joint government meetings have been organized regularly to facilitate the development of bilateral relations in various fields, including economy, agriculture, infrastructure, investment facilitation, culture, and education. These meetings also aim to outline work plans for supporting Serbia's EU integration process. Thanks to the strengthened cooperation, bilateral trade turnover rose from 1.4 billion EUR to 2.5 billion EUR from 2013 to 2017. Unlike Slovakia and Romania, Serbia readily accepted the initiatives of Budapest to give Hungarian citizenship to ethnic Hungarians in Vojvodina.<sup>47</sup> As a country with large minorities in neighboring states, Serbia is used to double citizenship of its citizens (Bosnia and Hercegovina, Croatia, Macedonia etc.), and does not see it as a threat to its sovereignty. It also allowed the Hungarian government to directly support Hungarian institutions and media in Vojvodina, and to launch an economic development program for Vojvodina. The close cooperation of the governments also made it easier to overcome some contradictory situations. Particularly interesting was the acceptance of Hungarian policies during the 2015 migration crisis and erecting the fence on Serbia-Hungary border, although Serbia was one of the main transition countries.

Government level cooperation overlapped party level cooperation. SNS allowed Fidesz to carry out political campaigns in Serbia before Hungarian elections, but in exchange the

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<sup>45</sup> Five Hungarian young men severely beat a Serb man (who was provoking them because of their nationality) in Temerin in 2004 and were sentenced for 61 years in prison in total. The tough sentence was heavily criticized by the Hungarian community. The Hungarian government lobbied for easing sentences which partly happened because of the Amnesty Law.

<sup>46</sup> "Magyar bocsánatkérés a szerb parlamentben." *Múlt-kor*, [https://mult-kor.hu/20130626\\_magyar\\_bocsanatkeres\\_a\\_szerb\\_parlamentben](https://mult-kor.hu/20130626_magyar_bocsanatkeres_a_szerb_parlamentben), [September 7, 2019].

<sup>47</sup> To descendants of citizens of Austria-Hungary prior to 1918 who could prove that they speak Hungarian language.

Hungarian government party openly supported SNS in its election campaigns. Political closeness of Fidesz and SVM was also not an issue, and in 2014, one Serbian citizen, Andor Deli (member of SVM), Vojvodina's former secretary for education, administration and national communities, became a member of the European Parliament in 2014 under Hungarian mandate.

Many criticize the close relationship between the two governments, mostly due to illiberal style of rule of both leaders, Vucic and Orban. Some see this cooperation opportunistic, with Serbia obtaining the support for the EU integration and investments from Hungary, while Budapest got a partner that does not oppose its initiatives regarding Hungarian minorities in neighboring states.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the situation is currently beneficial, as seemingly there are no misunderstandings and political clashes between the two states, and one of the biggest fears in Serbia, that Vojvodina Hungarians would push for the territorial autonomy, is seemingly out of the table. Hungary firmly supports the EU integration of Serbia, and sometimes its officials issue very strong statements regarding the treatment of Serbia by the other EU member states and the EU institutions.<sup>49</sup>

In total, the current level of relations between the two countries could be described as the best in the modern history, but the question remains if the "political reconciliation" is being translated into the "societal." While there is symbolic approximation of historical narratives, the historians did not manage to close the issue and neither did the Mixed Interstate Academic Commission for war crimes against civilians 1941-1948 that was established in 2010. Undoubtedly, the number of interethnic incidents dramatically fell. On the other hand, looming issue of de facto segregation of the biggest minorities in Serbia, including Hungarians, could become a problem in the future.

## Conclusion

The Serbian-Hungarian reconciliation process achieved significant results in terms of cooperation of governments and dominant parties. Accordingly, this process could be rather considered as a top-down approach in which the political parties played a crucial role, including the facilitating role of SVM. Confidence-building at state and party level enabled not only the development of minority policy framework and its better implementation but facilitated also the increase of economic, political, educational and cultural cooperation. The mutual support for minority protection for Hungarians in Serbia and Serbs in Hungary was essential to changing the course of bilateral cooperation. Hungary's leverage has been significantly strengthened by the EU integration process. On

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<sup>48</sup> For example, see Milošević, Ana. "Cinične igre Srbije i Mađarske oko prošlosti." *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/04/06/cinične-igre-srbije-i-mađarske-oko-prošlosti-04-05-2018/?lang=sr>, [September 4, 2019].

<sup>49</sup> See "Sijarto: Evropska komisija veštački usporava integraciju Srbije u EU." *Politika Online*, <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/427455/Sijarto-Evropska-komisija-vestacki-usporava-integraciju-Srbije-u-EU>, [September 4, 2019] or "Sijarto: Srbija što pre da postane članica, 2025. Dalek Datum." *Radio Television of Serbia*, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3213715/sijarto-srbija-sto-pre-da-postane-clanica-2025-dalek-datum.html>, [September 4, 2019].

the one hand, the EU integration framework itself provides strong incentives for reforms but as each step of the accession process requires the support of all member states, the member states can put great pressure on the (potential) candidates.

However, it is questionable how such a top-down approach can work in the long run. Although the position of both ruling parties is stable, it is important to ensure that the reconciliation process does not rely only on the political will of leading politicians. Therefore, societal aspects of reconciliation should receive more attention in the future. Eventually, trust among people can create secure and stable living environment along with better economic and labor market opportunities.

Minority policy framework is likely to be challenged by demographic changes soon too. The main reasons are population aging and emigration to Hungary and Western Europe. Emigration got easier due to the policy of granting citizenship to ethnic Hungarians abroad by the Hungarian government, so it is plausible that the numbers are even lower today than in 2011 (appr. 40 thousand Hungarians already left country in the 2000s because of the unfavorable environment and for better opportunities abroad) and the upcoming 2021 census will show that.

### **Recommendations for Hungary and Serbia**

- The recommendations focus on the strengthening of societal aspects (confidence-building among the people) of reconciliation.
- Both governments could put more resources into youth exchanges between the minority and majority groups. A permanent program might be founded for this purpose.
- Minority policy reform in Serbia should also strengthen intercultural elements that can also enhance people to people relations and improve integration.
- Stronger support and focus on the work of the Mixed Interstate Academic Commission could encourage approximation of historic narratives that could also facilitate better implementation of minority policies (for example: rehabilitation law)
- So far mainly dominant parties played the crucial role in defining minority policies. Broadening societal support for those solutions could enhance ownership of minority policy framework.

### **Lessons for Western Balkans**

- The Serbian and Hungarian case suggests that the change of narrative concerning the “other side” is crucial for reconciliation. In other words, the first step in the reconciliation ought to be ending the practice of invoking historical tensions

concerning the “other side” as an argument in domestic political struggles. This would assist in relaxing the current political atmosphere and boost communications between the two sides.

- This case also suggests that the integration of minorities into wider society should be supported through innovative minority policies in line with best European standards.
- Recognition of the other side's victims in past conflict is also important for reconciliation, as it enables a path towards adopting a single, joint narrative about the past, thus removing another common point of friction.
- Finally, there is no reconciliation process without the top down approach - namely, it is the politicians' responsibility to recognize where points of friction are, and whether they will be addressed depends on their political will. However, in case of breakthroughs, politicians and leaders should also push for bottom-up approaches which would ensure that confidence and cooperation among communities in concern will develop on the ground as well, strengthening local ownership of minority policies.

# Albania – Serbia relations: Bridging over troubled waters

*Gentiola Madhi, Jelica Minić*

## Introduction

The relations between Albania and Serbia have been marked over past decades by the absence of political dialogue and the presence of diplomatic friction. This weakness has been reflected in the relations between respective peoples. Despite being the two major ethnicities in the region, the mutual relations are still far from being considered mature and demand for the presence and intermediation of third parties in order to smooth down long-lasting prejudices, intolerance and distrust.

In the aftermath of the Kosovo war, both countries resumed the bilateral relations as of January 2001 through an exchange of diplomatic notes. However, the mutual relations did not break through until November 2014, when Prime Minister Rama visited Belgrade - the first official visit of an Albanian leader in Serbia in 68 years. This symbolic and historical act created a fresh political momentum and imprinted a hopeful beginning of a new cycle of political and societal rapprochement. The official visits in the respective capitals of Rama and Vucic were strongly backed by major international actors like Germany, EU and the United States, and were organized at the margins of the so-called Berlin Process. During the first joint press conference, both political leaders shared their vision that time had come to move forward the mutual relations through a “unified approach for a better future for our peoples”<sup>50</sup>. In technical terms, these countries do not have any open bilateral issues. However, the Achilles’ heel and most contentious issue for both remains the question of Kosovo’s statehood, which cannot be excluded from the agenda when referring to the improvement of relations between the two countries. The fluctuation of relations between Prishtina and Belgrade certainly has an external effect on the relations between Serbia and Albania. Therefore, the resolution of Kosovo’s status would contribute to furthering of bilateral relations and overall stability of the region.

Moreover, over the past decades other obstacles have plagued the bilateral rapprochement between Albania and Serbia. In particular, there has been a lack of a true governmental commitment on both sides to embark into a trust-building and normalisation/reconciliation process. Additionally, the time factor has affected the countries’ political dynamics, resulting in a missed opportunity to broaden mutual understanding, in line with the general international political developments. The main challenges that have fuelled the negative perceptions between Albanians and Serbians lie on the widespread historical enmity, nationalist rhetoric, different interpretation and instrumentalisation of the past by political elites, mutual prejudices raised by a lack of knowledge and people-to-people interactions, miscommunication, etc. In particular, the

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<sup>50</sup> “Albania's premier makes historic visit to Belgrade”, *DW*, <https://www.dw.com/en/albanias-premier-makes-historic-visit-to-belgrade/a-18051456>, [31 October 2019].



education has been affected and misused for the perpetuation of stereotypes among several generations.

Today Albania and Serbia need to invest more in the development of a shared vision of the future. In this regard, the EU accession perspective provides for a collective ambition not only for these two countries but for the whole region and it can serve as an impetus for a broad and sustainable reconciliation process. In fact, the Summit of Thessaloniki in 2003 offered to the region a European perspective, and since then the countries have made several steps ahead. Recently, the European Commission included reconciliation and resolution of existing bilateral disputes as a flagship priority in its last enlargement strategy towards the Western Balkans. This move constitutes a step ahead in the prioritization of reconciliation process, besides being an additional conditionality for the countries. The Western Balkan countries need to step up their collective efforts in order to improve mutual relations and get prepared to take on the membership obligations.

Against this background, the present chapter seeks to identify the main steps forward made in the improvement of bilateral relations between Albania and Serbia since the leaders' breakthrough of 2014. The overall aim is to reflect on lessons learned over the past five years and to provide recommendations on how to bring forward this newly established cooperation momentum and invest in a more sustainable and multi-level reconciliation process.

### **Bilateral rapprochement: one step at a time**

The normalisation/reconciliation process between Albania and Serbia needs to be seen from a multi-dimensional perspective, which provides space to learn from past failures and take adequate measures to address existing bottlenecks at bilateral level. Berlin Process framework has created space for these countries to frequently meet on different occasions and address bilateral relations and inter-societal rapprochement from a wider regional perspective. This expanded approach has provided for a broader negotiation space and has contributed to enhance bilateral cooperation in new policy areas, which fall particularly in the soft policy sphere. During the past five years, between Albania and Serbia four new bilateral agreements have been signed in the field of youth, culture, tourism and statistics and some of them have already provided some track record of implementation.

The cooperation between Albania and Serbia has been established since 1926, and the number of bilateral interstate documents amounts to 66 (being agreements, conventions, protocols, etc.), including also those signed between Albania and the former Yugoslavia. With the reestablishment of regular dialogue in early 2000s, the new agreements were signed in compatibility with the European agendas of the two countries, such as in the field of evasion of double taxation, investments' protection, fighting against organized

crime, readmission, etc. It was only in 2006, after the secession of Montenegro, that Albania could conclude interstate agreements exclusively with Serbia.<sup>51</sup>

According to the census in Serbia in 2011, there are 21 national minorities<sup>52</sup>, including Albanian. Serbia has in place regulations on national minorities in compliance with the modern European standards<sup>53</sup>. Albanian minority has its National Council of Albanian National Minority<sup>54</sup> representing its interests and providing implementation of its rights. In Albania nine national minorities, including Serbian, are recognized by the law. There are three registered associations of Serbs and Serbs and Montenegrins. In October 2017, a framework Law on the Protection of National Minorities was adopted<sup>55</sup> followed by 5 related bylaws in May 2019<sup>56</sup> with remaining bylaws in the procedure. The status of national minorities is getting upgraded in both countries with permanent monitoring of national, European and international institutions.

What this bilateral cooperation pipeline suffers from still today is not the quantity of agreements or the differentiation of policy areas, but the presence of an implementation strategy and political will lasting beyond the mandate of the leaders who have signed those agreements. At the moment, there are in the pipeline few draft bilateral agreements ready to be signed, such as on planning and urban development or international road traffic, which have not been concluded due to the countries' fluctuating dedication and enthusiasm. The oscillations in the contractual relations remain hostage of the political developments at the regional level; thus, additional time is needed in order to create a flexible and pragmatic mindset to address pressing and mutually benefiting issues.

### Economic rapprochement

Focusing particularly on the economic cooperation, with the entry into force of the free trade regime (CEFTA) in 2006, mutual trade experienced some impetus. The annual rates of growth in mutual trade of goods and services are high, especially for services. There are mutual investments of individuals and companies from both countries, which while very low steadily increase. The business sector follows its own norms and principles, distancing itself to a certain extent from the political rhetoric, and thus contributing to the facilitation of interactions between the citizens of both countries. Some joint companies were established and business climate for cooperation of respective business

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<sup>51</sup> Simurdic M., "Srpsko-albanski odnosi", European Movement in Serbia, [www.arhiva.emins.org/uploads/useruploads/dokumentipdf/Srpsko-albanski-odnosi---Simurdic-15-07-2016-.pdf](http://www.arhiva.emins.org/uploads/useruploads/dokumentipdf/Srpsko-albanski-odnosi---Simurdic-15-07-2016-.pdf), [31 October 2019].

<sup>52</sup> "Rezultati popisa stanovništva, Srbija 2011", *Vreme*, <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1157758>, [31 October 2019].

<sup>53</sup> "Zakon o zaštiti prava i sloboda nacionalnih manjina", online at [https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon\\_o\\_zastiti\\_prava\\_i\\_sloboda\\_nacionalnih\\_manjina.html](https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_zastiti_prava_i_sloboda_nacionalnih_manjina.html), [31 October 2019].

<sup>54</sup> "Zakon o nacionalnim savetima nacionalnih manjina", online at [https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi\\_download/zakon\\_o\\_nacionalnim\\_savetima\\_nacionalnih\\_manjina.pdf](https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi_download/zakon_o_nacionalnim_savetima_nacionalnih_manjina.pdf), [31 October 2019].

<sup>55</sup> European Commission, "Albania 2018 Report", <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-albania-report.pdf>, [31 October 2019].

<sup>56</sup> European Commission, "Albania 2019 Report", <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-albania-report.pdf>, [31 October 2019].

communities is considered as favorable. Although the trade is based on the low value-added products, it is expected that expansion of construction works in both countries will contribute to the advancement of its structure and induce the exchange of more sophisticated goods and services.

The establishment of the Albanian-Serbian Chamber of Trade and Industry in 2016 constitutes a positive step forward. It facilitates circulation between business communities, information exchange, organization and participation in fairs and business forums, and exploring opportunities to apply with joint projects for funding from different European programs.

A promising area for cooperation is tourism, since there is a growing interest and potential for both countries. The establishment of a direct flight route between the two capitals in 2014, has contributed to the increase of tourism. In 2017, the number of Serbian citizens visiting Albania was approximately 5.000.<sup>57</sup> Last year, the two countries signed a five-year cooperation agreement on tourism, designed to attract foreign tourists, promote cooperation between tourism organizations and increase the bilateral touristic traffic. The joint ambition is to create a common tourism strategy, which includes also the other countries of the region.

At the regional level, the two countries are members of more than 50 regional organizations.<sup>58</sup> In view of the prospective EU membership, regional structures remain the main binding factor in the Western Balkans, providing the necessary space for “normality” in this turbulent region, where different actors are able to recognize common interests and commit to realize them – moving from economic and social sphere, to infrastructure and energy, environment, etc. The introduction of the 100% tax by Kosovo to exports from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina did not affect trade between Serbia and Albania. It only increased the unregistered flows of goods, which existed previously at a lower level. However, this move led to polarization of parties’ interests (Albania supporting Kosovo and Serbia coupling with Bosnia and Hercegovina), and paralyzed the work of CEFTA, which already had internal problems with reorganization. These divisions are dangerous for the work of other regional organizations and projects in which the activities had developed rather smoothly a year ago.

The existing regional organizations as well as the newly established ones are supposed to bear the complex burden of intertwined activities in order to get Western Balkan countries closer to the EU and to each other. Any serious deterioration of bilateral relations inflicts harm to the great efforts that have been invested into regional cooperation.

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57 Rudic F., “Albania, Serbia Team Up to Boost Tourism”, *Balkan Insight*, [www.balkaninsight.com/2018/05/18/albania-serbia-team-up-to-attract-foreign-tourists-05-17-2018](http://www.balkaninsight.com/2018/05/18/albania-serbia-team-up-to-attract-foreign-tourists-05-17-2018), [31 October 2019].

58 Regional Cooperation Council, “Changing with the Region: RCC Strategy and Work Programme 2017-2019, Annex 1”, available at <http://www.rcc.int/admin/files/docs/reports/RCC-Strategy-and-Work-Programme-2017-19-rich.pdf>, [31 October 2019].

### Inter-societal connectivity

The fact that only after seven decades the two countries finally exchanged visits at the highest level and established normal diplomatic relations had influence also on media reporting. Reporting on policy areas like culture, economy and tourism are seen as the bearer of normalization process, despite referring to politics still being subject to negative media coverage on each other. This trend is most visible in Serbia, while in Albania reporting tends to be neutral.<sup>59</sup> It is important to note that political leaders influence the general tone of media reporting which then shapes the overall public opinion.

Opinion polls conducted on the mutual perceptions of bilateral relations show that there is a prevailing conviction among the citizens that the other side is not ready to build friendly relations, while its own nation and state are evaluated as benevolent in this respect.<sup>60</sup> The importance of bilateral relations is perceived as significant for overall position of each state both internationally and regionally (57% Serbs and 47% Albanians)<sup>61</sup> since it is considered an important factor of stability and security in the Balkans. Majority of the public believes that deepening of these relations is in the best interest of both countries, even despite the unresolved relations between Serbia and Kosovo, and clear position of both sides regarding this issue is 'to agree to disagree'. These polls show that the lack of information and knowledge on both sides is one of the strongest barriers in changing deeply rooted ethno-centric attitudes and negative stereotypes. Economic cooperation, tourism and cultural exchange are considered as sectors of change that can contribute to generating normalization and stabilisation in mutual relations.

Different civil society organizations in both countries have worked closely since the early 2000s, in order to accompany the normalization process between the countries, break existing enmity and prejudice and become a direct contributor to inter-societal reconciliation. As this type of cooperation has shown to be fruitful, the number of joint projects, initiatives and CSOs networks has boosted over time in various areas.<sup>62</sup> Different European institutions, member states as well as the US and other bilateral donors support efforts of CSOs. However, there has been lack of continuity, long-term strategy and coordination, and wider outreach at the societal level.

Positive development was recorded after establishment of the first two regionally-owned intergovernmental organizations aimed to support CSOs - Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and Western Balkan Fund (WBF). The establishment of RYCO lies upon the Memorandum of Understanding on Youth Cooperation that was signed in November 2014 between the leaders of Albania and Serbia. It envisaged the establishment of a

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59 Pavlović A., Čeriman J., "Albania in the Serbian Media (January–September 2017)", European Movement in Serbia, Belgrade 2017, [www.emins.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Albania-in-the-Serbian-Media\\_eng.pdf](http://www.emins.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Albania-in-the-Serbian-Media_eng.pdf), [31 October 2019].

60 Faktor Plus, "The relationship between the Serb and the Albanian nations, perspectives of that relationship, friction points, possibilities and fields of cooperation", Belgrade, 2018, as a part of a broader project "Serbs and Albanians - Which Way Further?" that Serbian news agency Tanjug organised with the Albanian news agency ATA, with the support of the Norwegian Embassy in Belgrade.

61 13% Serbs and 26% Albanians do not consider them as important. Ibid.

62 For example: Balkan Civil Society Development Network, Regional Convent on European Integration, RECOM, Western Balkans Enabling Project for Civil Society Monitoring of Public Administration Reform - WeBER, SEE Think Net, etc.

permanent dialogue between the youth and institutions of both countries. Initially conceived as a bilateral instrument to bring together the younger generations, fight mutual prejudice and strengthen inter-cultural learning, this memorandum turned into a blueprint for a region-wide non-formal education on commonly shared values at the European level. The bilateral memorandum on youth cooperation is currently implemented by the ministries in charge of youth affairs, with the support of OSCE offices in the two countries. Since 2015, at least eight summer/winter schools and training activities have been organized in Albania and Serbia on cross-cultural dialogue and democratic values. Over three years, more than 2.000 people have shown interest to attend these bilateral activities,<sup>63</sup> marking so a step forward mutual knowledge and comprehension.

Meanwhile, WBF was established with the strong support of the Visegrad countries, following the example of the International Visegrad Fund. RYCO and WBF rely upon annual quotas devolved by governments of the region, beside external funding sources. Both organizations have managed to bring together grass-root organizations from all the countries of the region, enhancing the exchange of knowledge and people-to-people connectivity. In 2018, RYCO received 278 project applications, where 44 applicants from Albania had 17 partners from Serbia, and 79 applicants from Serbia had 32 partners from Albania. Whereas the WBF preliminary assessment shows that about 60-65% of project applications or projects approved have been submitted jointly by partner organizations from Serbia and Albania and the percentage is even higher for Serbia-Kosovo CSO partners. These figures show that grass-root organizations are expanding their networks and bringing young people closer to each other, creating a new cornerstone in the reconciliation process.

However, what has not been addressed in this panorama, are the existing **language barriers** between the citizens. Enhanced support to learning Albanian/Serbian language would facilitate access to information, enhance inter-personal communication and provide a deeper sense of respective traditions, culture and identity. The interest in the other country's language has been growing, and accessible language courses would certainly counter the negative stereotyping of the past.<sup>64</sup> At the University of Belgrade there is an Albanian Language Department, whose establishment lies back to 1925, and around 10-15 students enroll annually in the study program. Three years ago, following the establishment of the Albanian Cultural Club association in Serbia, an Albanian language course was organized and more than 50 people enrolled immediately.<sup>65</sup> Whereas, in Albania this opportunities are still missing, despite the strong interest shown not only by young people and civil society activities, but also ordinary citizens that have a keen interest in deepening their knowledge of the region.

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63 OSCE, "OSCE Presence in Albania brings young people from Western Balkans together in third edition of Youth Trail", available at: [www.osce.org/presence-in-albania/420851](http://www.osce.org/presence-in-albania/420851), [31 October 2019].

64 Salihu F., "Learning each other's language", *Kosovo 2.0*, <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/learning-each-others-language>, [31 October 2019].

65 Ibid.

The **intermarriages phenomenon** is a direct contributor in the establishment of cross-cultural connections. Life stories show that the countries are much closer than public polls indicate. According to unofficial evidence of interpreters who facilitated marriages in some parts of Serbia, in the area from Belgrade to Pirot, there were around 500 marriages of Serbian males and Albanian females (mostly from Shkodra and its surrounding, and Tirana) during 2012-2017.<sup>66</sup> Many families from Serbia and Albania continuously communicate and visit each other. Albanian brides have been highly respected as good mothers, diligent housewives, and adaptive to the social environment. The majority of Albanian ladies are Catholics (70%), but also of Muslims confession (30%), usually converting into the orthodoxy. It is interesting that most of media reporting of these marriages is positive.

Finally, steps forward have been made also in **cultural cooperation**, contributing to developing channels of mutual understanding, dialogue and knowledge based on 'sameness' rather than 'otherness'<sup>67</sup>. Although additional efforts are still needed in discovering common grounds that connect the countries, there is some evidence on a growing interest to learn more on respective art and literature. Various authors from both countries have been published in the respective languages, such as Ismail Kadare, Dragan Velikić, Svetislav Basara, etc. The Albanian Ministry of Culture has given particular importance in this regard to the inclusion of Serbian authors in the list of books translated under the Literature Translation Fund. The respective ministries signed in 2017 the Memorandum on Cultural Cooperation with the aim to strengthen mutual cooperation, exchange and implementation of joint activities in the field of art, culture and cultural heritage, in line with European and UNESCO standards. Although this type of cooperation can certainly contribute to spread of connecting symbols and social trust-building, yet the cooperation remains dependent on political will and financial opportunities provided by the governments. At the moment, there is no clear strategy or joint event calendar on both sides on how to proceed with the materialization of the political declarations and legal instruments in place.

## Conclusions and recommendations

There are several areas where positive steps ahead have been made in the past years. The EU accession process constitutes the glue for the fostering of cooperation between Albania and Serbia and there are good opportunities in the economic and soft policy sector to capitalise upon the existing momentum. The historical animosities and prejudices, the unresolved Kosovo issue, lack of knowledge and communication, different composition of international affiliations and traditional geopolitical gravitation (Mediterranean vs. Central European) remain to represent obstacles that need to be

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<sup>66</sup> "Serbs increasingly marry Albanians! There is no divorce", *Espresso*, [www.espresso.rs/vesti/drustvo/171717/srbi-sve-vice-zene-albanke-sve-ih-je-vice-razvoda-nema-a-ovako-su-im-ugovoreni-brakovi-video](http://www.espresso.rs/vesti/drustvo/171717/srbi-sve-vice-zene-albanke-sve-ih-je-vice-razvoda-nema-a-ovako-su-im-ugovoreni-brakovi-video), [31 October 2019].

<sup>67</sup> Alpekin H. B., "The issue of 'otherness' has become a cliché, but the problem still exists", European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, [www.eipcp.net/policies/2015/alpekin/en/print.html](http://www.eipcp.net/policies/2015/alpekin/en/print.html), [31 October 2019].

addressed. While some of them could be overcome in the near future and others not, they provide potential for a way towards long-term normalisation and partnership.

Albania and Serbia, two small countries, although representing two biggest ethnic groups in the region, are the main axis of the complex regional structure of different organisations, networks, initiatives covering all relevant issues, at different levels. Any crisis in Serbian-Albanian relations is harmful for everybody else in this setting and for the EU, as the main mentor and architect of the „regional approach“. In a near future, a spectacular improvement of bilateral relations cannot be expected. But small improvements on a day-to-day basis are taking place despite the ups and downs instigated in the political sphere. The political will is a crucial stepping stone for furthering progress, although incentives and successes in other areas exert pressure to change the political attitudes.

Some steps that should be taken into account by the countries are following:

- Legal framework for bilateral relations is slowly getting better but its development should be further encouraged;
- Further improvement of the status and rights of minorities should be one of the priorities;
- Trade is always making its way legally or illegally being one of the best indicators of positive developments in bilateral relations. Thus, any obstacles to trade and investment should be removed especially in tourism and other services where the exchange is getting more balanced;
- Constructing and connecting the infrastructure will bring people and businesses closer and improve the position of the two countries in the European surroundings;
- Mobility of citizens and professionals is crucial for improvement of mutual knowledge and understanding;
- Civil society should be encouraged to increase its contribution to opening new avenues for partnership and cooperation;
- Youth is the critical actor of normalisation and the most sensitive one as the young people have been exposed more than other generation to negative propaganda and nationalistic political patterns. That is why cooperation between Serbian and Albanian universities and other educational or scientific institutions and individual experts has to be encouraged and supported by national, regional and European donors as a crucial leverage in developing new cooperation patterns and realistic perceptions.
- Bilateral relations of Albania and Serbia could be considered as one of the least difficult cases in the region as there is no burden of recent past and the main task is normalisation not reconciliation. Both countries can contribute to releasing

Kosovo from its historical trap and opening the space for much wider Serbian-Albanian alliance, which could transform the Balkans and contribute in consolidating the EU.



## Conclusion: What can the Western Balkans learn from Visegrad reconciliation?

*Jana Juzová*

In comparison to previous enlargements, much more emphasis is put on regional cooperation, resolution of bilateral disputes and reconciliation in the case of the Western Balkans' EU integration process due to the relatively recent violent conflicts. This reflects mainly into establishing regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations as one of the accession conditions for the candidates for EU membership. Furthermore, the topic of reconciliation is also a crucial issue in the Berlin Process, and is repeatedly stressed in the EU's strategic documents (European Commission's Strategy for the Western Balkans<sup>68</sup>) and high-level political meetings between EU representatives and their Western Balkan counterparts (such as the Sofia Summit between EU and Western Balkans leaders<sup>69</sup> or the annual meetings of high political representatives from Visegrad and Western Balkans<sup>70</sup>).

While the EU remains a very important actor in supporting the reconciliation process in the Western Balkans, mainly due to the shared EU perspective of the region, reconciliation cannot be viewed only through the lenses of EU integration. It is important for the political leaders in the region to fully realize that there will be no progress without real reconciliation. Due to very high interdependency between the countries and communities, it is crucial that the political leaders as well as regular people learn not only to coexist peacefully with each other but to cooperate and communicate in a positive and constructive manner. A progressing reconciliation process can enhance cooperation in all areas, including intraregional mobility and economic issues, boosting economic development and strengthening stability and security in the region.

As the Visegrad examples show, joint pursuit of EU integration or engagement in regional cooperation formats have a supportive effect on improvement in bilateral relations among countries, as they set new joint agendas separate from the bilateral issues, requiring cooperation and constructive approach by all countries involved. However, neither regional cooperation platforms nor EU integration solve the bilateral issues per se; political will accompanied by concrete actions and initiatives is necessary. As reconciliation is a multi-layered and multi-faceted process, active involvement of all actors is necessary. Apart from the political elites and civil society, engagement of the business

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<sup>68</sup> European Commission, "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans", [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf), [3 November 2019].

<sup>69</sup> European Council, "Sofia declaration of the EU-Western Balkans summit, 17 May 2018", [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/34776/sofia-declaration\\_en.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/34776/sofia-declaration_en.pdf), [3 November 2019].

<sup>70</sup> Visegrad Group, "V4 Statement on the Western Balkans", <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/v4-statement-on-the-190912>, [3 November 2019].

sphere, religious leaders as well as local actors (such as municipalities) must be encouraged to achieve a real societal reconciliation.

A common denominator for all above presented successful cases of reconciliation or normalization of relations was a change in political discourse towards a more understanding and positive approach towards the other side. The studies showed that political elites have a crucial influence over the narratives and discourses created in the societies about “the other” and can thus either support the reconciliation process or disrupt it by feeding into the existing resentments and tensions. In this regard, a responsible political leadership is necessary for a successful process of dealing with the burden of the past and establishment of mutual relations in the spirit of cooperation, integration and progress towards a prosperous future. While political will and normalization of relations on the highest political level is not sufficiently incentivizing for societal reconciliation by itself, it is a necessary condition; no reconciliation in the societies can be successful without political support.

The need for promotion of changed narratives about other ethnic and religious groups, as well as other nations in the region, is inseparable from the question of change in the education system. For this change to be achieved, cooperation between historians from different countries striving for the creation of common historical narratives promoted through formal and informal education is needed. Preventing nationalist one-sided narratives from dominating the education on history is of crucial importance for the future of the region, as the youth is a key actor in the reconciliation process and overcoming of the legacies of the past but also very vulnerable and potentially easily manipulated. To support the process of young people getting to know each other across nations and communities, and consequently bringing down the negative narratives and existing prejudices and creating connections instead, this change in the formal education system needs to be accompanied by enhanced support to exchange and mobility programs. Only by fostering contacts between the people in the region and removing barriers for regional mobility can real connections and sustainable cooperation be achieved.

## **Recommendations**

### **1. Regional cooperation and EU integration are not a panacea for bilateral issues**

As the Visegrad cases show, neither engagement in different regional cooperation formats nor shared striving for EU integration solves bilateral issues and problems in mutual relations. While regional cooperation as well as the objective of EU membership can have certain mitigating effect on the bilateral tensions, by setting a new agenda based on shared interests, these issues have to be resolved on the bilateral level. The integration into the EU cannot be seen as a solution.

## **2. Legal framework ensuring minority rights and supporting cooperation is necessary**

The studied cases showed that an appropriate legal framework and democratic institutions ensuring proper proportional representation of national minorities in decision-making as well as in overseeing of the implementation help to mitigate the potential inter-ethnic grievances and tensions. Any discriminatory practices along ethnic lines have to be avoided. Strengthening local ownership of minority policies is desirable in order to overcome potential separation and instead build trust and cooperation among communities.

## **3. Any obstacles to trade and mobility across the region have to be removed**

For the reconciliation process across the region to take place, any barriers preventing trade, tourism, youth mobility, cooperation in the third sector etc. have to be removed. On the contrary, creating infrastructure bringing people and businesses closer, support to mobility of citizens and professionals, cooperation in education and science as well as policies supporting regional tourism are crucial to overcoming of the existing divisions. Enabling cross-regional mobility is important especially in the case of young people and further support needs to be dedicated to these programs.

## **4. Education systems need to be reformed and avoid promotion of one-sided historical narratives**

Without a fundamental change in the education systems in the region, any moving forward from the burden of the past will not be possible. This change needs to counter the nationalist and mono-dimensional narratives that still prevail in education on history in the Western Balkan countries. For the reconciliation process to progress, biased historical narratives, igniting mutual prejudices and grievances and potentially hindering the success of other initiatives, can have no place in the education system. To achieve the creation of common historical narratives which then could be promoted through education, a commission of historians from different countries of the region has to be established and adequately supported.

## **5. All actors must be engaged in the reconciliation process**

Reconciliation as a multi-faceted process requires not only political leaders and civil society's involvement, but, for example, also business communities and religious leaders becoming engaged in the process. While political support is crucial, the reconciliation process requires a synergy between both a top-down and bottom-up approach.

## **6. Institutions supporting civil society activities promoting reconciliation should be supported**

The efforts of the civil society in advancing the reconciliation process must be adequately supported at local and regional level. While the EU and other external donors' contributions to support to activities in the area of reconciliation are beneficial, a lack of domestic and regional funding leads to insufficient regional ownership of the process. The establishment of the WBF is a positive step in the right direction, but establishment of bilateral councils and funds aimed to support the initiatives implemented by civil society and other local actors would help to strengthen the process further.

## **7. Narratives and discourses play a crucial role, inflammatory rhetoric must be avoided**

Narratives and political discourse about the other side have a significant impact on the advancement or hindering of the reconciliation processes. It is crucial that political elites avoid abusing the existing tensions, grievances and resentments for their own short-term political gains and instead focus on the lasting sustainable solutions and processes leading towards truly better future for the region. The practice of invoking historical tensions concerning the "other side" as an argument in domestic political struggles must end. It is imperative that the political leaders take on the responsibility of the role they play in reconciliation across the whole region.

## **8. Recognition of past crimes and symbolic gestures play an important role in the reconciliation process**

The recognition of the past crimes committed by one's own nation is an integral part for the healing process in all affected communities. The examples show that a public apology for the past crimes and recognition of the other's victims open up the way to achieving a common historical narrative, normalization of relations and further cooperation. Moreover, the examples show that such initiatives resonate very well at wider societal level, thus supporting the reconciliation. Ideally, this recognition should come from the political leaders. However, symbolic gestures coming from other actors (e.g. religious community) also have an unequivocal positive effect on the reconciliation process.

