

PEACE AND SECURITY

A QUARTER OF A CENTURY OF RECONCILIATION THAT DOESN'T PAY OFF

An Essay on 25 Years of Remembering Srebrenica

Aleksandar Trifunovic
jul 2020.



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Dragan Čavić, former president of the RS



"...We will look for the missing and insist on that, until every last one of them is found. But, the past, the crimes, the sufferings and the self-pity should not be the central topic of our politics."

Sulejman Tihić, former member of the BiH Presidency



Reconciliation is a small human gesture. It is imperfect, clumsy, and timid, but it is undoubtedly a human gesture. Reconciliation is a journey on which we embark alone, hoping that someone will follow us on the way back. A journey on which we embark frightened, but from which we return encouraged.

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"First as a man and a Serb, and then as a father, brother and son, and only then as the president of Republika Srpska, I have to say that those nine days of July of the Srebrenica tragedy are a dark page in the history of the Serbian people. The perpetrators of this crime may not be justified by anyone or anything. The ones who committed such a crime, perhaps claiming they did it on behalf of the people to whom they belong by their name and surname, committed a crime against their own people as well."

With these words, on June 22 2004, Dragan Čavić, then the president of Republika Srpska, on a prime time show on the public TV broadcaster RS Radio Television, addressed the citizens of Republika Srpska with reference to the report of the Republika Srpska Commission on the Events in Srebrenica. The following quotation was the end of his address.

"I cannot know if the relatives of the killed Bosniaks, who are the victims of war crimes committed by Serbs, will find any relief in my address. I understand and feel the pain of those who are still looking for their closest family members. They are all entitled to law and justice. And they will have faith in justice if they learn the truth about the destiny of their closest relatives, and if those who committed atrocities get punished. As the president of Republika Srpska, a Serb, a citizen of Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina and a father of two children who see their future here, I invite every individual, regardless of their national, religious, partisan or any other affiliation, to embrace truth and respect, thus helping our history become a chronicle of humanity and revival, and not one of conflict and destruction."

Even though the Report of the Commission for Srebrenica was criticized for not stating the numbers and the names of the victims, the Report and the address by Dragana Čavić sent shock waves throughout Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the entire region. People were used to crimes in Srebrenica being denied or minimized by the official policy and politicians in Republika Srpska. Whether by accident or not, there was a brief power outage in a large part of Banja Luka during Čavić's speech.

Soon after the publishing of the Report, the political power of Dragan Čavić started rapidly fading. He experienced defeat within his own party, the SDS. He was replaced as the president of the Party, which he left soon after that and

founded his own party. Political opponents, but also the general public, never forgot his speech about Srebrenica and considered it treacherous and coerced. They unfailingly reminded him of this in every subsequent political campaign.

In 2009 Čavić was interviewed by the author of this article on the TV show BUKA covering the topic of "Is there Bosnia and Herzegovina?". Čavić, already a fierce opposition politician by that time, said that he stood behind every word from his speech about the events in Srebrenica and that, regardless of the troubles it had brought him, he would not have changed a letter in it.

In the same series of interviews, I spoke with Sulejman Tihić, the president of the SDA at the time and a former member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Several months earlier, at the SDA congress, Tihić had said the words which permanently damaged his leadership position in this party.

"I believe it is about time to change the order of priorities of the Bosniak-Bosnian politics, where the central position has so far been taken by the philosophy of victim. We will look for the missing and insist on that, until every last one of them is found. But, the past, the crimes, the sufferings and the self-pity should not be the central topic of our politics." This statement was announcing the new direction in which he intended to take his party.

"You spent a large part of the war imprisoned in Šamac, Brčko, Bijeljina, Batajnica, Sremska Mitrovica", I reminded him during our conversation, "and this statement practically challenges your status as a victim of war and a politician. Would you still repeat it?"

"Certainly I would repeat that statement", replied Tihić, "and I think that this statement is good and useful for everyone, primarily for the Bosniaks, whose politics are burdened with the narrative of the past, the genocide and the sufferings. We, naturally, cannot forget the past, and we should do everything to bring the perpetrators of these crimes to justice. But at the same time, it cannot be the priority of our politics and it cannot be in the first place. My opinion is that the issue of crimes, the issue of the past should be explored by historians, courts, and prosecutors. Of course, we politicians should create the conditions for that to be done in an objective manner, but we should deal with the issues of the present, we should deal with the problems of the future and that is in the interest of all, the Bosniaks, the Serbs and

the Croats. You mentioned prison camps; I've experienced torture in all five of them. I witnessed executions. In Bosanski Šamac nine of us were in one room, one meter twenty by one meter eighty, for 10 days. And there was only one bench. With all the torturing, beating, etc. However, in all those times, in all the camps I've been through, there were always people who would come to me, who would help, who would simply take you to another office when the executions come. I spoke about this at court in The Hague. Through my experience, through my life, through those difficult moments, I realized that you cannot identify a crime with a people. Because Sulejman Tihić would not have survived those five prison camps if everyone was the same. So this experience that I had creates an obligation for me to do everything to prevent this evil from repeating."

Sulejman Tihić's speech at the SDA congress in December 2008 did not bring the change he had sought in the order of priorities of the Bosniak-Bosnian politics, where the central tenant is the philosophy of victimization. Rather, his statement contributed to gradual weakening of Tihić's power in the SDA and strengthened the position of Bakir Izetbegović, who took over the leadership of the SDA even before Sulejman Tihić died of a terminal illness.

This year marks 25 years since the atrocities in Srebrenica.

To date, no politician, neither on the Serb, nor on the Bosniak side, has declared anything more important for the future and reconciliation of Bosnia and Herzegovina than Dragan Čavić and Sulejman Tihić.

The fate that struck these two politicians after their speeches leads to only two possible conclusions – that the promotion of reconciliation and dealing with the past does not pay off, and that political success is guaranteed by the very opposite, denial of crimes and avoiding reconciliation as a topic.

This theory is easy to prove by the example of Milorad Dodik, currently the most powerful politician in BiH. In 2007, the International Court of Justice in The Hague ruled that the massacre in Srebrenica, in which more than 8000 persons were murdered, qualifies as an act of genocide. Immediately after the International Court of Justice's ruling on BiH's lawsuit against Serbia that the Republika Srpska army forces had committed genocide in the broad territory of Srebrenica, Dodik stated in an interview for Face TV, "I know perfectly well what happened, there was a genocide in Srebrenica. This was ruled by the court in The Hague and this is an indisputable legal fact."

This was the first and the last time that a politician from Republika Srpska publicly acknowledged the ruling of the International Court of Justice. Soon after that, Milorad Dodik himself started denying his statement, using every opportunity to present a new view of the events in Srebrenica.

At his party's election rally in Srebrenica, in 2010, Dodik

stated: „Unborn Serbian children cannot be guilty for something that happened ten-fifteen years ago. They cannot and they will not be. And there was no genocide here. And we shall not accept that there was genocide. There were more Bosniaks who left Srebrenica and headed towards Tuzla and Sarajevo, than those who got killed here. That is not genocide."

That year, Milorad Dodik and his party achieved one of the best election results.

He did not stop there, and a year later he directly compared the atrocities in Srebrenica with those committed in the Jasenovac concentration camp.

Speaking at a conference on Jasenovac in Banja Luka, on May 25, 2011, he stated that "it is a fact that Srebrenica happened within the final military operations in this area during the war, whereby Jasenovac and the lack of clear truth about Jasenovac were at the very basis of it (sic). Srebrenica is a place of a great crime, but it is incomparable to Jasenovac".

In the meantime, he personally opened a students' dormitory named in honor of Radovan Karadžić, who was sentenced in The Hague for the crimes in Srebrenica, thus sending a symbolic message that he does not expect future generations to question the past in a way which is not in line with his narrative and with the political narrative in the RS.

The final act in this drama occurred on August 2018 when the Government of Republika Srpska annulled the Report of the Commission on the Events in and around Srebrenica from July 10 to 19, 1995, which had been previously rejected by the RS National Assembly. Dragan Čavić also rejected the Report of the Commission, indirectly disclaiming his speech in 2004, permanently taking away part of its meaning.

Sulejman Tihić's words are long forgotten. No one remembers them, neither the words nor him. The philosophy of victimhood still dominates Bosniak politics, not giving up on the most important political asset of that philosophy, the Srebrenica genocide.

In a recent corruption case related to the procurement of respirators for the needs of the Federation of BiH, the fact that one of the participants in this affair was from Srebrenica was presented to the public as a mitigating circumstance.

When he was speaking about the previous local election in BiH in Switzerland, the current Grand Mufti Kavazović encouraged Bosniaks to register and vote in Srebrenica and not allow "a Wallachian rule in Srebrenica", he said. "We will not forgive anyone who is able to, and does not want to. Anyone who can cast their vote, anyone who can register, anyone who can prevent a Wallachian rule in Srebrenica. May it be sinful if they don't do it... It is ours and we must not abandon it", said Kavazović at the time.

Based on the results of the previous election, it may be concluded that the Grand Mufti did more on mobilizing the Serbs, and very soon after that, the new mayor of Srebrenica Mladen Grujičić stated that there had been no genocide in Srebrenica, and that this would be his position for as long as he lived, and that he would never attend the memorial service in Potočari.

The constant, daily denial of the genocide in Srebrenica by politicians in Republika Srpska is considered to be good enough material for the harmful and wrong thesis that Serbs are a genocidal people, which has found its place even in the official Bosniak dogma.

These two conflicting positions are strong and massive enough to repudiate the idea of reconciliation and facing the past, and push those goals to the margins of society, into the hidden corners of rare NGO circles which have not yet given up on this country. At the same time, the politicians in power, the primary promoters of those narratives, never stop misusing them. They cooperate successfully while pitting the citizens against each other and have pillaged the remaining Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats of this country for a quarter of a century, without any punishment.

At the same time, those Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats are at each other's throats in the virtual and in the public sphere, without noticing that they have long become a surplus in their own country, those living, as well as the dead ones, and that they exist only as a useless, but necessary, part of the postelection deals.

Postelection plunder is divided among their political leaders in a relaxed atmosphere of the former brotherhood and unity, with the most popular local singers entertaining them, without any of them ever mentioning the topic of genocide and war crimes.

Meanwhile, as a result of false patriotism and futile politics, Srebrenica as a town is fading away and disappearing, even with all the postwar donations for its development.

I was in Srebrenica in June 2015. During that time, the most widely read news on a local portal was the opening of a pastry shop, so that after 20 years one could eat a cake in this town. From talking to people in Srebrenica, I found out that they still did not have a bakery, a butcher shop, a shoe shop... The authorities in Srebrenica have been politically appointed from Sarajevo and Banja Luka. After they finish their work on the Town Council, the appointed officials go to their homes outside of this town, or even outside of the country.

The pastry shop is now closed down.

In the Memorial Center in Potočari, white graves made of stone stand in orderly, endless rows. Only a random birch tree among the graves disrupts this sad harmony. These graves are the reminder of the several thousands of people who are no longer there, people who died for no reason. Some graves

have no mourners, because the entire families were killed within those ten bloody days of July 1995.

It is horrifying.

The silence of the graveyard is disrupted once a year, on July 11, when bodies of the murdered people of Srebrenica are collectively buried.

This year, the remains of 82 unidentified bodies will be buried in the nameless graves.

This year as well, the media in the Federation and the region will broadcast the event live, thereby reminding everyone of the crime. Social media will be boiling with the condemnation from one side and the relativization from the other. The media in Republika Srpska will report on the event as dictated by protocol, mentioning it only as much as they have to, as one item in the news programs. Another typical postwar day in Bosnia and Herzegovina will pass, without any hope that we are a little smarter and that people here have learned anything from this tragedy, from their past.

At the Battle of Verdun, around 300,000 German and French soldiers were killed. On that battle field there now stands a joint Memorial Center, one of the most important symbols of the reconciliation between France and Germany, without which the present European Union would have been mission impossible. At every step there are signs Respect the Silence, suggesting that you should think in silence about the bones of 300,000 unknown soldiers from both armies who gave their lives at this place for the overly expensive nonsense of war.

The Memorial in Verdun is not a place where one nation should feel defeated, and the other triumphant. It is a place of reconciliation and the constant contemplation about the past, which must not be repeated.

How impossible and distant seems the moment when the places of crime and memorial centers in Bosnia and Herzegovina will become the places of meeting in mourning and shame, forgiveness and reconciliation. These places now serve as the political stage from which the calls for new battles arise, while no one even mentions reconciliation.

In the last 25 years the local political elites have not shown any interest in taking the most important topics for the future—facing the past and reconciliation—out of the sphere of manipulation and putting them into the center of political events. One cannot expect local politicians to initiate the process of facing the past and reconciliation because by doing that they would lose this ongoing conflict, which is their main tool in the exploitation of the remaining population.

Although 25 years after the war the situation looks hopeless, we must never lose hope in the good people, the only thing that is left. The ability of one person to pity another is the

greatest achievement of evolution, the origin of civilization, it is what distinguishes a human being from a beast. The ability to pity another was necessary for the development of the world as we know it.

We should be happy that we still have them, those good people willing to reconcile and work on reconciliation. And such good people live and work in the present Srebrenica, sometimes as a bass guitarist in a local rock band, a coach of a local football club, a worker in a local grocery shop, who gives you goods on credit.

Those common, open-hearted people are a grain of hope, that necessary ingredient of life that makes life here tolerable. They are reconciliation.

Reconciliation is not grandiose, huge, nor does it happen under the spotlights and on stages.

Reconciliation is not a stampede of discordant people who are running with their arms open wide across a big field, above which the sun is rising at the moment when they weepingly embrace each other and reconcile.

Reconciliation is a small human gesture. It is imperfect, clumsy, and timid, but it is undoubtedly a human gesture. Reconciliation is a journey on which we embark alone, hoping that someone will follow us on the way back. A journey on which we embark frightened, but from which we return encouraged.

A journey that we must take if we wish to heal as people, as a society. Otherwise, we will have at least a quarter of a century of strange and almost certainly painful journeys ahead of us.

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