

"No one can renounce the history of his own people. We don't have the right to forget the past, because it could come back and become the present."

Jean Amery

Ivan Kuzminovic, Serbia

INTRODUCTION

This essay is inspired by a gesture made by young people, coming from a country dramatically different than mine, maybe even coming from another civilization. Young men and women, high school students in Gentsburg, Austria, made a tribute to the victims of Joseph Mengele, the chief of medical service on the 10th of March this year, in the concentration camp in Auschwitz. The reason for them doing so is that they were so "unfortunate" to have been born in the same small town as the notorious killer.

Today, almost 65 years after World War II has ended, we find ourselves as witnesses of a completely different generation of young Austrians, who feel ashamed by the doings of a villain whom they geographically coincide with.

Several days after reading in the daily newspapers about this highly moral act of Austrian high-school students, an amazing thing happened to me. I was walking down one of Belgrade's largest avenues and stumbled upon a striking scene. A not very small group of high-school students was walking down the street with the faces of Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic depicted on their T-shirts! It is very difficult to describe these two men without losing one's temper and sense of decency. In short, they are people accused of the most horrid war crimes, who have been cowardly hiding for the past decade.

What does, then, Serbia have to do with the above mentioned gesture of Austrian students? A great number of people living in Serbia, alongside with the current right-winged nationalist government, are wrongfully doing something that can be perceived almost as a crime, done onto others, but also onto themselves and their own history. A crime that is visible, and therefore provable. What "crime" is it, then? It is the absence

of any form of SHAME concerning our recent history, regarding the crimes that have been committed in the name of the citizens of this country, committed by the army and the police of the Republic of Serbia on foreign territory as well as on it's own.

THE PROBLEMS

Today in Serbia, it is normal to see young people aged 15 to 25 strolling through the city and carrying all sorts of objects depicting the faces of CRIMINALS. Can you imagine walking down the street of Hamburg and catching a glimpse of a high-school kid having a Himmler, Goebels or Hitler T-shirt?!

I think that the value system in my country has deteriorated significantly, it is virtually upside down. Three times a month, students aged 18-25 have regular discussions promoting war criminals as heroes, on the premises of the state university! It is not uncommon to hear speeches against other nations (for example our neighbours – Croats), as well as anti-Semitic opinions. These speeches are implying the come-back of traditionalism in it's worst medieval authoritarian form. It is clear that the current government is behind this, I think it is evidence enough that this is happening in the building of the state university, where the participants of these campaigns are using university resources.

Here is another example of some of the views of certain structures in this society: recently, during an arrest of a war crime acusee, a great number of people (a large percentage of them being young) surrounded his building while trying to prevent the arrest. The mass confronted the police and there was a struggle that lasted several hours before he was finally detained.

Furthermore, two young people have been arrested just last month for putting up anti-Semitic posters and writing graffitti on the walls of a Jewish cemetery in Belgrade.

The violence that had happened last march in Kosovo had triggered a massive reaction throughout Serbia, but especially in Nis and Belgrade. Young people in

Belgrade have gathered in front of the Belgrade mosque, the oldest religious building in this city of great historical significance. The mass started throwing Molotov's cocktails at the mosque, and they finally set it on fire. The entire building burst in flames, while the symbolical number of police officers withdrew from the scene instead of stopping the hooligans. I perceive this incident as shameful for two reasons: first, the behavior of the mass is unexceptable; and secondly, I strongly condemn the police for not stopping them and reacting properly, because that way they would have shown that the government dissaagrees with such violent behavior.

HOW TO CHANGE THE MINDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

The state of mind of young people in Serbia is my biggest problem, but it is also the biggest barrier for this country on it's path towards stability. I keep wondering what kind of future can we build in this country when such a large population of young people is still convinced that people accused of war crimes are people who deserve respect and not condemnation.

Alongside poverty which I consider one of Serbia's greatest problems, I think that one aspect has not been getting enough attention, and it is – CULTURAL ISOLATION! It is the result of years of sanctions, and the feeling of total exclusion from all events from around the world.

Young people here have no idea what life outside Serbia is like – a survey shows that 80% of people under 25 have never left the country, many of them don't even have a passport! They also have no information about "the outside world" because it is hard to find any truthful and positive information about the lifestyles of young people living elsewhere. This particular manner of reporting is a direct consequence of Milosevic's thirteen-year rule founded on the basis of depicting of "the outside world" as the enemy; and the foreign policy of Europe and the United States whose actions did not try to prove otherwise.

This image of young people in Serbia is not easy to change and it will take years for results to show. But one thing can certainly be done – the liberalization of visas, at least for students in the beginning. If you allow young people become a part of the

world, if you let them travel freely, visit concerts, exhibitions and plays, you are emancipating them and your investment will eventually pay off. You are allowing them to live a normal life.

WHAT CAN EUROPE DO?

At this moment, not only in Serbia, but in Croatia and Bosnia as well, there are dozens of ideas and written projects made by young people. These people are not responsible for the wars that have happened in the Balkans. Their only "sin" is being born here. They are not to be blamed for what their cohabitants have done. And their sense of responsibility is not to be neglected. But let's be honest – they are a minority in their communities. This is the very reason why they should be treated as something rare, as an investment for the future.

The goal of this essay is to remind the representatives of international institutions that the future of such ideas and projects lies in their hands. The governments of the countries that these crimes happened in do not want to face these problems. Their only interest is to win in the upcoming elections. And in order to gain the votes of the majority, they dare not deal with crimes from the recent past. They are turning their heads the other way although it is their responsibility to resolve these issues. Solving problems should, therefore, be their job, while young people should be allowed to study, travel, fall in love...

But, since these social roles have turned around, my opinion is that the international community should:

- put pressure on the governments of these countries to initiate the reconciliation process
- directly help such initiatives by helping fund project that promote reconciliation

I feel that we should all work together if we want to live peacefully in this region. It is very important to deal with this troublesome past in order for all of us to have a better future together. Is this too much to ask?

WHAT CAN THE GOVERNMENT OF SERBIA DO?

And finally, there certain steps I expect of the government in Serbia and it's society:

- The first stage is similar to the treatment of alcoholics. It is crucial for both the government and the general population to admit that there is a problem. Therefore, it is necessary for this society to face it gruesome past. And a true beginning is to admit that what Milosevic and his apparatus have been doing in our names is a CRIME, and not any crime, but the biggest crime that Europe has seen since World War II
- The truth must be accessible to everyone, and the state should do everything in it's might to do so through systematic legal measures. Here, I am primarily concerned about writing schoolbooks for primary, secondary schools and highschoools, where it should be openly and truthfully explained what kind of crimes were there, who has committed them and on whose behalf
- The state should officially, through it's representatives, apologize to the victims of these crimes
- A reasonable damage should be paid to the victims of these crimes
- And, finally, I strongly feel that individualisation of guilt is a very important part of the healing process. All the victims on all sides should be more aware that individual crimes were done by individuals, and not an entire people (Serbs, Croats or Bosniaks), in order to overcome the prejudices on the Balkans that are slowing down the healing process.
- The government's role is to start arresting more of those who were responsible for the crimes. This is a way of distancing from what Milosevic has done in the name of the entire nation

WHAT AM I DOING ABOUT ALL OF THIS?

I am an active member of a student's club called Stalkeri. Founded by a small group of sociology students, faced with the harsh reality, the club Stalkeri has only one goal:

to change the consciousness of young people. We have been dealing with a number of things: changing the prejudice about the Albanian people, the Croats, the Bosniaks, but also about sexual minorities. The essence of projects that this group has been undertaking is reconciliation. Stalkeri are also among the founders of EESSA, the East European Sociology Students' Association. We have both participated in and organized several international conferences as an attempt to bring young people closer together and discuss many sociological topics, among which is the reconciliation after the wars in ex Yugoslavia. These conferences were attended by students from all over Eastern Europe, and many distinguished university professors have given lectures at these events.

The most challenging project undertaken by the Stalkers themselves was the visit by eight Albanian sociology students from Kosovo for a seven day seminar in Belgrade. In this seminar, we discussed the prejudices present in both our societies, and searched for means of overcoming them. We also commented on our lifestyles, and, as it turned out, their problems are no different from ours. Alongside everyday problems like how to pass an exam and what to do for the holidays, one problem was appearing to be the biggest. And it is poverty. The kind of poverty atypical for most European countries. So, Kosovo and Serbia are two small countries in Europe that you could easily confuse with countries in Africa. And really, the poverty is as serious as in any other Third World country. Unemployment, low income, low standard of living, problems concerning national, religious and sexual minorities, a crisis of social and general civilisation values, all of these problems exist in both these countries. But the most significant outcome of this seminary was the feeling of shame that we from Serbia felt when we were introduced to the stories what the Serbian military forces have done to them, their family members and their friends. Our colleagues felt the same way when we discussed the crimes done to Serbs that are taking place today. When we talk to our colleagues about how many lives have already been ruined, what else is there to feel but helplessness and despair?

The visit of our colleagues from Kosovo has shown us that the wounds of war have not yet healed. Today, Belgrade is not a place where one can speak Albanian (the language of Kosovo Albanians). And as far as the possibility for Belgrade students to

visit them in Kosovo is concerned – it is close to impossible. No one in Kosovo is willing to guarantee us safety.

Nevertheless, the effects of this meeting have been very beneficial. It has been agreed upon several new projects, but most importantly, this was the first serious communication on a human as well as on an academic level between professors and students from Kosovo and Belgrade.

The mere organization of this project was very challenging yet difficult. It took several months of hard work to get the necessary funding, which was provided by a foreign organization (our own organizations were not happy about the idea of Albanians coming to Belgrade to talk about war crimes). It is shocking that no one here is interested in helping young people discuss such a painful past in order to be able to look into the future.

The intention of this essay is not whining over one's destiny. This is merely a way of pointing out some everyday problems young people in my country are facing.

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