

The role of civil society in reconciliation – RECOM and other initiatives

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I. Introduction

Conflict is a negative event as it weakens the economy and weakens the role of the state in the international arena. It creates the possibility of violation of fundamental rights and freedoms and the opening of wounds which are transmitted in the future leading to a long destabilization. Likewise, conflicts affect all aspects of society, whether in the political, social, economic and cultural aspects and the way they are developed. Conflict also changes the interaction of individuals in society.

The escalation of the conflict leads to the loss of public trust in previous values, principles and norms and justice and even further can lead to divisions of different groups of society on ethnic, racial or religious grounds by breaking the connecting bridges between them.

A negative consequence of the conflict is also the fact that it negatively changes the involvement of civil society in the conflict as it disrupts the organizational social framework, the means of communication, by reducing the possibility of concrete actions by them and also weakens the ability of governing structures to lead, or even worse helps them become authoritarian.

In countries that have emerged from previous conflicts, the achievement of peace and stability depends heavily on the processes and progress of transitional justice, whether in terms of criminal justice processes or other peace-promoting projects. One of the key mechanisms of transitional justice and one of its most important components is precisely the reconciliation process which serves to clarify the facts and achieve stability. Reconciliation is a process through which the actors involved aim to prevent the return of conflicts and to build peace and interpersonal relations between people, as well as between people and the state, in cases where this balance has been destroyed due to civil wars.

This is a multi-dimensional concept which develops depending on the conflict situations, specific actors involved and the character that the post-conflict situation may have. From this, we understand that reconciliation solutions that may be considered successful in one situation may not have results in another. So, the actors involved in this process must be well aware of the situation, the mechanisms through which they will intervene in this process and the objectives they want to achieve through this process.

The idea of reconciliation is that it is an intermediate point between the conflicting past and the common future, it is a mechanism that enables a society, why not a region, to be transported from one phase to a new era for it.

Building peace and stability has been a permanent objective of the international community, but we must say that it has not always been successful as long as external and internal problems are present. However, the truth is that in post-conflict societies it is very important to appreciate and take into account the important role that civil society has in peacebuilding, because regardless of external actors or the will of governing structures, this process would be ineffective without civil society or public trust in these initiatives.

II. The role of Civil Society and its importance

Civil society is an important element and an influential social formation in the development of the state and society. We have mentioned it constantly and we will do it in the future because of its special role in building peace and stability in the Western Balkans region and in achieving reconciliation at all its levels. But do we call civil society today and what is its composition today? In fact there is no absolute or clear definition for the concept of civil society as it is a broad concept that may include a series of social structures and on the other hand may have a different composition from one state to another, as the groups influencing this framework are different in each state.

Scholars describe civil society as the voluntary action of individuals who share the same values that stands out from the state, family or market. Like non-governmental actors, various organizations, associations and voluntary groups, as well as networks of different sizes, densities, and levels of interconnectedness, religious, professional, social, cultural organizations, NGO-S. So Civil society should not only be understood as NGOs, but also as churches, business associations, traditional leaders, women's and youth associations, journalist, academics, diasporas, etc. These are all actors that can play a crucial role as a societal asset, and need to be positively engaged in the process.

Civil society is important as it serves as an observer of the actions of the government, serving to promote the rule of law and democracy, and the principle of check and balance. On the other hand, when conflicts are interstate one, it is difficult to reach a consensus of political elites without their interaction with civil society, which has the opportunity to create the right network between influential elements in civil society, thus guaranteeing and facilitating the peacebuilding process.

Civil society interacts with intergovernmental structures, but also with the most important structures of economic development and can even influence or overshadow the market.

Some of the most important functions of the civil society organization are that they protect citizens while advocating public interest. Civil society serves as a controller of government activity by holding government leaders accountable for their actions. In the post-conflict countries civil society helps socializing citizens' behaviour, building

community, mediating between citizens and state actors and delivering services necessary for the functioning of the society. Civil society leaders and organizations provide an important perspective that reveals the particular community's needs and cultural characteristics.

However, we must keep in mind that the role of civil society and its composition varies from country to country and it varies depending on the context of the events in which it seeks to influence. In post-conflict countries, the structures of civil society that may influence the reconciliation or peace process are determined by the way the conflict develops and the actors involved. Thus, for example in one country religious leaders may have a high role in the process of normalizing relations between parties in the conflict, while in another country they may have been participants in the conflict and consequently could not be part of this process.

III. Relation between the role of civil society, reconciliation and peacebuilding

Civil society as a bridge between the state and individuals can serve at different stages of the reconciliation process. Thus civil society can help to design a better agenda for reconciliation, giving its perspective as the best recognizer and representative of social formations and their interaction, so that not only reconciliation of opposing political parties is included in this framework but also certain population groups.

While government or international leaders may be unaware of the importance of the cultural context in which they are implementing post-conflict initiatives, civil society involvement will provide the cultural context and understanding of particular community attributes. Despite its important role, civil society needs to act in accordance with and not replace state functions, thus creating a way in which citizens become active players in their society in order to ensure that their interests are protected and governmental initiatives are culturally appropriate to a particular situation.

Civil society, being a multidimensional structure with a very heterogeneous composition, has the potential to directly influence the implementation of the

reconciliation process, but what is more important, is its capacity to support and protect the victims or the groups that have suffered during the conflicts. An important part of the contribution that civil society makes towards reconciliation is the support even after this process, to make its results sustainable and to prevent their return of the conflicts in the future. It is very important for civil society to be active in post-conflict societies, especially when the conflict has involved many states, as it should be the leader of the process but also the factor or actor that ensures the continuity of the reconciliation agenda.

An important function for civil society is to promote dialogue between the parties in a much wider area than the political one, by expanding the space of reconciliation and dialogue with groups affected by the violation of fundamental rights and freedoms or abuses, often playing the role of advocate for these groups in order to increase their influence and on the other hand to increase their credibility in this process.

Civil society is able to raise awareness of discrimination and hate crimes and to break the cycle of violence in post-conflict contexts. This capability comes from the very features of civil society because it is locally rooted, and thus, it has legitimacy in the community in which it operates as well as direct access and influence on the group's needs and interests.

Civil society can also contribute in ensuring that the gender dimension is mainstreamed throughout the entire process, considering that women are a group that in the major parts of conflicts have suffered abuses and violations of their rights. In this context, civil society organizations can include them as active actors, by bringing their experiences in light and also making public the events and why not perpetrators, if this is possible.

Moreover, if the state does not take responsibility for parts of the reconciliation process, such as documenting war crimes, civil society needs to ensure that this is done. So, for example, if there is no state will to find the lost persons, organized families of the victims and survivors can try to find their relatives and thereby become important stakeholders in dealing with the past. Equally, veterans for example can become essential part in the reconciliation process.

Peacebuilding is a process that aims to neutralize the conflict and prevent its recurrence by ensuring a lasting peace and building the necessary structures and mechanisms to regulate relations between the parties to the conflict, so it is emphasized by the binomial concept of prevention and dealing peacefully with conflicts. Peacebuilding is not an easy process, because the ending of war and conflict doesn't necessarily produce peace in an absolute meaning, because the ending of violence doesn't mean the reconciliation, healing the past wounds and democratization. Just the ending of the conflict produces only negative peace while the positive peace needs more efforts to be achieved.

While the peacebuilding process includes the prevention of armed conflict, the management of conflict and post-conflict peacebuilding, civil society can help in the third of the stages, but its role is more noticeable and indispensable at the stage three.

Conflict resolution involves both peacebuilding and rebuilding of physical structures; it is not simply ending armed conflict, but identifying, underlying societal structures that first led to the conflict. In post-war rebuilding, civil society specifically can play an important role by monitoring the implementation of the peace agreements and the related reform agenda; strengthening transition to democracy; and helping to organize and apply plans for physical, economic and institutional reconstruction.

One of the objectives of peacebuilding is justice. Transitional justice involves a series of mechanisms to achieve the ultimate goal of peacebuilding and reconciliation. But we must keep in mind that this is a process that can be a very long one, it is not always effective and it is not always addressed to all perpetrators because in some cases only the main figures who have committed these acts can be subject to sanctions.

In these conditions, it is the duty of the state to re-establish restorative justice. Restorative justice, being a new concept, has a different approach to conflict resolution, as it focuses on achieving reconciliation through the processes of compensating victims, apologizing, finding the perpetrators, rehabilitating these categories in society, etc.

A solution proposed can be the set-up of truth commissions and reconciliation. It is here that civil society groups make an extraordinary contribution, both in participating in these commissions and in being involved in structures that aim to achieve the final

objective of the process. Restorative justice through truth commissions can serve as a beneficial alternative to traditional justice systems while providing an opportunity for both state and civil society activism. Truth commissions are a good place to start for lasting reconciliation processes, promoting public discourse about previous injustices.

In these processes, CSO for example can help identifying victims, can organize public events or meeting where the victims talk about their abuses and perpetrators tell the violations and crimes they have committed. These kind of events can help also that perpetrators show their remorse and regret but also apologise for what they have done as a way of dealing with the families of victims that allows them to rehabilitate and to re-enter in the society. These kinds of processes will be impossible without the amnesty process because the perpetrators will not be willing to tell the truth and many crimes will be undiscovered but also the division between people will be present.

IV. The role of civil society in Western Balkans

The region of the Western Balkans, which after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia has experienced constant conflicts which have brought many victims and other problems of economic and social nature in the post-conflict period. As we have already mentioned above, the conflict in this region has two levels in terms of regulation, which must be worked on simultaneously: intrastate and interstate conflicts.

The common point of solution in both of these plans are precisely the transitional justice processes (as mentioned above) as the punishment of perpetrators, the compensation of the injured, the administration of justice for the victims, the discovery of the truth about the crimes and abuses that occurred, the discovery of the perpetrators and the publicizing of the damage suffered by the victims, the provision of justice and reparations for the missing persons, as well as the reintegration of the victims and the rehabilitation of the abusers. However, transitional justice and the reconciliation process, as an important part of peacebuilding would be impossible if they took place only in the institutional framework or judicial processes, as this would lead to only superficial reconciliation and interpersonal relations could remain unstable.

Adding the fact that conflicts are also of an interstate nature, it is necessary, through the reduction of political tensions, hostile attitudes and harsh rhetoric, to establish bridges of cooperation through joint projects in all countries of the region, which will contribute in building dialogue, peace and stability. Projects that promote peace, education, connections between youth of these countries, will help create a culture of peace and a stability that comes from the society more than a governmental solution.

According to a study by the YIHR, in order to strengthen the role of civil society organizations in reconciliation process in Western Balkans countries, there is a need for more support in the local and regional policy and decision makers and also a better financial support for their initiatives. It is important to create a networking plan for coordination of CSOs initiatives in order to make their efforts to reconciliation more effective and their efforts should be promoted through media. According to this study, *“Furthermore, reconciliation processes should be inclusive and comprehensive to engage all communities (including minority groups such as Roma and the Jewish community) and should be based on a bottom-up approach. Meaningful reconciliation can only happen when it is driven by the local population. Local leadership and ownership are profoundly important for any substantive reconciliation effort. Therefore, grassroots initiatives, in particular youth initiatives, should be supported and encouraged both by international institutions/organizations and by local actors (public and private). As important actors in local communities, the local business community and perhaps even the religious communities in Western Balkans countries (which still have enormous influence on society in their respective countries) should be actively included in reconciliation efforts by means of providing financial support and by providing additional focus and encouragement for reconciliation.”*

A very important factor that has contributed to this process has been the European Union, which has linked its prospect of enlargement to the region with the stability of the region and a number of initiatives have been taken in the framework of reconciliation, and on the other hand, in its enlargement strategies, reconciliation is mentioned as an essential element.

The EU understands reconciliation primarily as the result of the normalization of state relations, as re-establishment of normal diplomatic and political relations between sovereign countries that have been divided by war. An ideal outcome of reconciliation, and at the same time a sign of its success, is economic and political integration in the EU. A central aspect of the EU discourse on reconciliation in the Balkans is the notion that the region should come to terms with history, that the past should be put to rest, and that people and politicians should focus on the future.

However, as we have noted above, the reconciliation process, regardless of the specific characteristics it may have and regardless of the dimension in which it takes place, will not be successful without the involvement of civil society and its initiatives.

IV. Berlin Process and RECOM and other initiatives

a) Berlin Process

Berlin Process is a diplomatic initiative proposed in the Conference on the Western Balkans in 2014 by the German chancellor Angela Merkel. In the Final Declaration by the Chair of this conference, it was stated that the participants agreed to establish a framework for a period of four years, during which they will strive to “make additional real progress in the reform process, in resolving outstanding bilateral and internal issues, and in achieving reconciliation within and between the societies in the region of the Western Balkans”. Furthermore, it was stated that the participants were “also united in the aim of enhancing regional economic cooperation and laying the foundations for sustainable growth. After the initiation of Berlin Process, in 2015 was organized Vienna Summit in the content of which the participants decided to sign the Declaration for the Establishment of Regional Youth Cooperation and Declaration on the Regional Cooperation and Solution of bilateral disputes, and also it was agreed to a document regarding the connectivity agenda. This process is an instrument/ mechanism for stimulating reforms that the countries of the region should implement in the context of joining the Union, through initiatives and projects in areas of importance to the region

as a whole and enhance different dimensions of connectivity in the Western Balkans: the economic, social and political.

A very important event that was organized as a side event of Vienna Summit, was the Civil Society Forum that discussed issues like freedom of expression, regional cooperation, creation of jobs, and it was decided by participants at the Vienna Summit that the civil society is a voice that should be heard in the process of EU integration of Western Balkans and that their involvement should give the message that this process is not reserved only for the political elites. In this context it was stated that civil society can contribute to Berlin Process in various areas like creation and implementation of national policies, solving bilateral disputes, youth cooperation, while monitoring and advocating the implementation of the agreements reach in the Summits.

In the context of Berlin Process, in the Vienna Summit was established the Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans. The Regional Youth Cooperation Office, modelled after the Franco-German model in Europe after the Second World War, as well as the Western Balkans Fund, modelled after the Visegrad Fund and helps to connect the youth of the region in joint projects that promote regional reconciliation. The cooperation by young people who are aware of the problems of the past but who have not been actively involved in the conflict is an important element for potential changes in education systems striving for multi-ethnic and / or mono-national interpretations of the recent past.

This structure aims to increase youth cooperation in the region by considering the youth as the most vital part of the population that can make an important contribution towards reconciliation, promotion of the values of democracy, diversity, active participation in politics and decision-making. Considering that due to the problems and legacy of the past, a large part of the youth of the region chose to leave due to lack of opportunities and unemployment, this Office, according to the Regional Study on the implementation of the commitments from 2015 Vienna Western Balkans Summit, supports youth projects that aim and contribute to the promotion of diversity and democratic values; enhancing sustainable regional cooperation, and establishing new relations amongst youth in the Western Balkan region; fostering reconciliation and constructive

approaches to remembrance; intercultural learning; increasing regional mobility; social inclusion and promotion of employability of young people; promoting the European spirit of cooperation, understanding, and tolerance; active citizenship and participation in decisionmaking processes by young people.

b) Igman Initiative

The Igman Initiative was created as a bottom-up network whose projects have been implemented at both micro and macro levels. It is comprised of CSO representatives, political and economic analysts, media, and local government representatives. Coordinating organizations of the Igman Initiative are Center for Regionalism (Serbia), Forum of Tuzla Citizens (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Civic Committee for Human Rights (Croatia) and Initiative for Regional Cooperation (Montenegro) Center for Regionalism is the General Secretariat of the Igman Initiative. The coordinating organizations, strongly led by antiwar activists, have a long history of joint advocacy for the respect of fundamental human rights and freedoms and rights of minorities, as well as consistent work on developing open democratic society oriented towards reconciliation and regional cooperation.

The Igman Initiative has been working on developing sustainable institutional mechanism intertwining civic initiatives, combining it with expert and evidence-based advocacy and lobbying activities. The Igman Initiative has fostered partnerships with government institutions at local, national and regional levels, international organizations and a diverse group of civic actors in all four countries.

The mission of the Igman Initiative is to promote and facilitate regional cooperation among the countries signatories to the Dayton Agreement and to influence their governments to resolve key issues relating to the citizens of the four countries.

c) Youth Initiative for Human Rights

I want to mention the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, which is a network of Civil Society Organizations (non- governmental) that develops its activity in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. This initiative is focused on

protection of human rights, finding truth, achieving justice and accountability while promoting a long-lasting peace and collaboration between people and states in the region. YIHR is an international body of civil society organizations that aims to educate the new generations with the culture of dialog and democracy in a processes of facing the past and constructing the future. YIHR has its focus on societies and citizens, especially the young people, and aims to be their voice in different important causes. This network has organized a high number of training programmes, exchanging programmes, actions and protest, studies, reports and summits that have brought together thousand international and regional youth activists with the purpose of exchanging experiences and taking new joint initiatives. YIHR has done the advocacy for different causes that includes the violation of prohibition of hate speech and the right for information, before national judicial bodies and international ones like ECHR.

d) RECOM

The term reconciliation has not only been employed by international and state actors in the judicial and political sphere. Its meaning has also been actively shaped by the views and actions of activists and civil society organizations. With the aim of regional reconciliation, in 2008, civil society organisations from the entire former Yugoslavia established a regional Coalition, which today includes over 2,000 organizations and individuals. Within it, an initiative has been launched to establish a Regional Commission for the Establishment of the Facts about the War Crimes and other Violations of Human Rights Committed in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia between January 1, 1991 and December 31, 2001 (RECOM). RECOM is a consortium set up by three high-level NGOs (Humanitarian Law Centre, Serbia; Documenta Zagreb; and Research and Documentation Centre, Sarajevo), a regional cross-border initiative strongly rooted in a network of NGOs and individual activists. This is a Regional fact-finding (discovery and truth-telling) mission that aims to prevent political manipulation for personal gain and prevent interpretations that jeopardize cooperation and linking group. Establishing the facts narrows the production of official narratives that mobilize nationalist policies, and thus facilitates bringing the entities within the region closer to each other, and bringing the region closer to the European Union.

RECOM is actually a civil initiative which aims to achieve reconciliation through creating joint collaborations toward transitional justice in the region, also giving a new larger concept and dimension to the reconciliation itself.

Conclusions

Civil society is a not – well defined body that is an factor of stability that defined the progress of democracy in a country. In post – conflict societies the process of peacebuilding and stability as well as reconciliation and their success depends on the scale of involvement and strength of civil society.

Civil Society can be involved in various stages and manners in the reconciliation process but what is important to underline is that this social structure/ framework pays attention to the roots of the initial conflicts as it knows better the characteristics of different groups and people by guaranteeing so the best agenda of reconciliation.

In the WB countries that derives from a turbulent past, the collaboration of the CSO of the region in joint initiatives to bring people together, in dealing and healing the wound of the past, creating a culture of peace, education and protection of human rights, will be indispensable for the long –lasting peace.

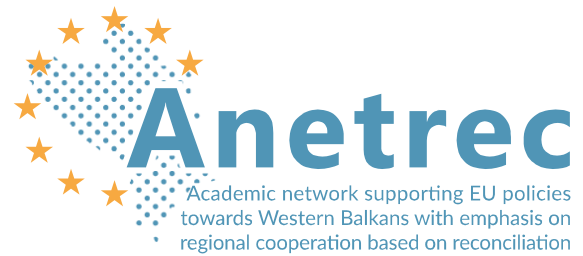
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