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Building peace in former Yugoslavia

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How does one build peace when one's surroundings view the current peace as sufficient? How does one handle the transition from conflict to post-conflict? Women activists in the Balkans keep up with the new trends involving economic reform and steps towards the EU, but speak of the 1990s with a certain amount of nostalgia. They argue that the room for action depends on how unified the movement is, and on whether it is prepared to be difficult and critical.

Building peace in former Yugoslavia

The never-ending (women's) story

Christina Wassholm

– While it was more difficult to work 20 years ago, it was also much more "romantic". We had a common goal: to stop the war and depose the regime. Our moral responsibility was towards the victims of crimes committed in our name, says Staša Zajović from Women in Black in Belgrade.

The time since the wars in former Yugoslavia has contained short moments of optimism for the women's movement, but has mostly been characterised by dashed expectations. It is not easy to create democratic, gender-equal societies when those in power are largely the same people, or from the same structures, who propagated war policies in the 1990s. Every country has its own particular challenges, but to a large extent, peace activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia share a common analysis of their contemporary societies. Vedrana Frašto from the organisation CURE in Sarajevo ("cure" means girls) is talkative and energetic. She thinks that it is hard to build social engagement in peace issues today.

– People are less interested now. They are tired of empty promises from politicians and burdened by the difficult economic situation. We notice that people are becoming increasingly apathetic, and that the politicians are doing what they can to create divisions between people, says Vedrana Frašto.

The activists in CURE travel around the country and hold workshops with young women, and they make use of culture, street actions and social media to reach out and mobilise people.

Bosnia and Herzegovina consists of two entities: the Federation and Republika Srpska. In the former, the majority are Croats and Bosniaks, whereas most of the Serbs live in the latter. This division, and the complex political system in Bosnia and Herzegovina, makes it more difficult for the women's movement to work at the national level – everything from laws to social insurance systems is different. The Dayton Agreement of 1995 established a political balance of power based on ethnicity, and those in power appear uninterested in changing the system.

> ***The victims of the Srebrenica genocide are honoured, as are victims of crimes against humanity in Croatia and Kosovo.***

Gordana Vidović is active in the little town Modriča in Republika Srpska. Her organisation Budućnost (Future) has achieved great success in its work to prevent violence against women, but now she wants to take greater measures to create real peace in her country.

– During the time immediately after the war it was dangerous to engage in peace activism. There were very few of us who had the courage to protest against nationalist leaders. They tried to stop us by threatening and insulting us, by throwing our children out of school, forbidding us to gather, by demanding identification, and by spying on us. But I still think it was a more fruitful time. We spread ideas about peace and democracy and we had hopes that our resistance movement would grow stronger, she remembers.

Gordana Vidović talks about how women's organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina to a lesser extent raise issues related to the war in the 1990s than the organisations in Serbia do. In Bosnia, she explains, they are more oriented towards neutral issues like violence against women and strengthening the role of women in the public sphere, but without mentioning controversial and unresolved issues from the war. She argues that one of the reasons that women's organisations in Bosnia have such good cooperation with one another is that they do not raise sensitive issues such as incidents from the war or ethnic belonging, things which still constitute a threat to peace.

– It is simply an unwritten rule that we follow the path of least resistance ... In order to move from this deadlock and affect change in the long term, we have to dare to deal with the tough issues and we need to be more difficult and prepared to meet scepticism from politicians and citizens in the short term, says Gordana Vidović.

Important to stick to one's ideals

When Gordana Vidović speaks of the Serbian organisations' courage in raising difficult issues, one of those she has in mind is Women in Black. It was established in October 1991 in Serbia as an addition to the already existing international network of anti-militaristic, feminist organisations with the same name. Its distinguishing attributes are

the black clothes its activists wear and its street actions – silent manifestations with messages displayed on signs or banners. In Serbia these messages are most often about honouring the memory of the civilians who fell victim to the rampage of the Serbian army and paramilitary groups. The victims of the Srebrenica genocide are honoured, as are victims of crimes against humanity in Croatia and Kosovo. "Not in our name", proclaim the members of Women in Black. They demand accountability from the Serbian state, and court trials for war criminals. They see it as their task to sweep their own doorstep. From the start until today, they have conducted around 1,500 street actions. Staša Zajović, the leader of the organisation since the start, observes that the massive resistance they faced in the beginning made the movement more united:

> *"Not in our name", proclaim the members of Women in Black.*

– At that time, there was a strong network, solidarity and clear political unity among anti-nationalist organisations. It was before the donor community created the climate of rivalry which rules now. In addition, the international solidarity with us was extraordinary, which helped us a lot. It is much harder today, now that international funding has been redirected to other regions in the world. Much more time and energy is spent on finding financial support, and on struggling against the requirements imposed by donors, says Staša Zajović.

The policies of the international community have affected civil society in the Balkans, she claims. She sees that it has created competition over resources between organisations, but also that it has made important initiatives possible.

– Today it is easy to get funding for work with issues related to the introduction of formal EU standards – issues which suit the state and its desire for integration, but which actually contribute to keeping the elite in power. Although it may be understandable why many organisations accept such project funding in their struggle to survive, this weakens the credibility and autonomy of civil society. It creates an elitist civil society, out of touch with reality, says Staša Zajović and quickly adds:

– Space is not something one is given, it is something one takes and develops. It is important to not let oneself be ruled by the project trends which are currently fashionable. Rather one should stick to one's moral and political principles, while at the same time developing new, long term ways of working together in solidarity without thinking that the results must come immediately – that, I think, is a good recipe.

From aid packages to advocacy

In 1993, the Swedish people's eyes were opened to the violations committed against the women of Bosnia and Herzegovina, largely thanks to the petition against the war which would later become the foundation Kvinna till Kvinna (Woman to Woman). In the beginning Kvinna till Kvinna's work in the region focused on survival and decent conditions for women and children who were fleeing. But soon, support was also provided to the initiatives against war and nationalism taken by women all over Kosovo, Macedonia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. A very important part of this support was to create meeting spaces, safe places where the women could gather to discuss what was happening in their country. Those meeting places allowed the women's movement to take increasing public space and make women's voices heard, to become a regional movement, and to oppose the war.

> *Space is not something one is given, it is something one takes and develops.*

Hanna Sällström, Regional Manager for the Western Balkans at Kvinna till Kvinna, describes how the support provided by the organisation has changed in parallel with the local women's organisations in the Balkans. From covering urgent needs and offering psycho-social support, Kvinna till Kvinna has now shifted its support to focus on advocacy work and on monitoring the implementation of laws.

– We can see quite a lot of progress in the formal areas. This is partly a result of the countries' steps towards EU accession, but in large part it is thanks to the persistent work of the women's movement, says Hanna Sällström.

What has not changed is Kvinna till Kvinna's long term perspective. The basic idea about the importance of a broad women's movement, with a mix of organisations working with different issues and in different ways to create sustainable peace, remains the same, as does the emphasis on facilitating meeting spaces and networking.

Presence matters

Two things seem to determine activists' space for action more than any other: the degree of resistance they meet and the degree of support – from within the movement and from the surroundings. The feminist movement has become much broader since the start twenty years ago, when it primarily consisted of an elite in the big cities. Today the base and the dispersion are much greater. In the case of Women in Black, the regime's demonisation of them in the 1990s made a lot of women scared to contact them due to fear of reprisals. Today the resistance looks different. Adapting to the EU, the governments have had to learn to tolerate a critical civil society. But when a right wing extremist organisation in Serbia recently published a so called black list of the organisations they believed should be tried for treason for their anti-patriotic activities, there was no support to be had from the government.

Kvinna till Kvinna has observed that the presence of international organisations makes a difference for the room for manoeuvre available to activists. Since a few years back, Macedonia has been receiving decreasing amounts of international aid. At the same time, there are reports of infringements on democracy, human rights and press freedom. Hanna Sällström is concerned that the negative development is allowed to take place now that there are fewer international organisations present. Lacking this presence and moral support, the activists have less courage to challenge the state than they used to. A follow-up study of Croatian women's organisations, conducted a few years after Kvinna till



PHOTO: CHRISTINA WASSHOLM

Since its establishment in October 1991 the organisation Women in Black has performed about 1,500 street actions. Dressed in black the activists conduct silent manifestations with an anti-militaristic message. The leader from the start is Staša Zajović, here at a network meeting with Women in Black in Serbia.

Kvinna phased out its financial support, shows that they have become less vocal in their criticism of the government, since they are dependent on support from government funds.

– This will continue to be a big problem in the Balkans. State funding of civil society has to be achieved, but for the foreseeable future it will not work as a replacement for funding from international donors, since the resources are often limited and primarily allocated to "harmless organisations" which do not challenge or critically monitor the state, says Hanna Sällström.

Large gap between expectations and reality

The outlook is not entirely grim. Today it is easier to raise many issues which were previously practically impossible to discuss. In Kosovo, the issue of sexual violence against women during the war has recently become a topic of discussion. This would not have been possible only a few years ago, but with support from Kvinna till Kvinna, the women's movement there has managed to shift the boundaries of what is permitted in public discussion. Snežana Karadžič, from the organisation Women Committee for Protection and Human Rights in Kosovo, argues that the women's movement has influenced women's conceptions of their role in the public sphere and in political life. But women's involvement remains most accepted in relation to civil society:

– The difficult task remaining is to make sure that women are present in the places where the key decisions are made. Today, there are institutions for peacebuilding, and our work needs to focus more on influencing these. In one way, our space to act has decreased as the work for peace has been formalised, but I believe that we need to adapt to the new reality.

– It is considered harmless to talk about violence against women and discrimination of women today, but few women activists have the courage to speak out publicly on current political topics and challenge the politicians, says Gordana Vidović from Budućnost.

She believes that many of them are afraid to become too critical since they depend on funding from their region or municipality. Both she and Snežana Karadžič are self-critical. They tend to mention the great achievements of the women's movement, for example in combating violence against women, only in passing and immediately followed by a "but ..."

– The reality, in the entire region, is so far from activists' ambitions and hopes. The activists struggle with the disappointment over the worsening of the situation, compared to what they had expected. We see a great, and largely justified, fatigue among many activists, says Hanna Sällström.

She believes that there is also a disappointment that other actors do not call the problems by their real names, and that international institutions cooperate with the elites and treat govern-

ments as more democratic than they actually are.

– At the international level, it can be sensitive to talk about peacebuilding in the Balkans, since this would imply that there is no peace in the Balkans today. The central question is what kind of peace.

Dangerous to work for peace

Over the years, Kvinna till Kvinna has worked a lot on sustainability within the women's movement in the Balkans. Many activists become burnt-out and never take a vacation, and in many cases, the internal functioning of the organisation is dependent on one or two leaders. When Kvinna till Kvinna interviewed activists a few years ago, for the report "Insiste, Persiste, Resiste, Existe", it became clear that the most vulnerable activists are those who work with LGBT issues and peace. These are topics that affect and provoke people. Peace issues challenge mighty people and networks, says Hanna Sällström:

– Many people came into power during, and as a result of, the war. The threats against activists are very real. This is a region where people who are seen as too difficult and critical disappear and even die. Political and economic power are very much intertwined.

That is why Kvinna till Kvinna often discuss security issues with their partner organisations. Funding may be provided for installation of security doors and surveillance cameras, and organisations are encouraged to take threats seriously, but the moral support is probably the most important contribution. For a small LGBT organisation in northern Serbia, knowing that it has backing from a large international organisation makes a difference for what it has the courage to say and do.

Efforts to increase space for young people

Vedrana Frašto from CURE in Sarejvo sees a difference between the different generations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The older generation, with its memories from the Yugoslav era, is often nostalgic and nourishes a hope for reconciliation and rekindling of the ties between different ethnic groups in the Balkans.

> ***Meeting places allowed the women's movement to take increasing public space and make women's voices heard.***

Among members of the younger generation, such memories are lacking, and it can be more difficult to engage them in these kinds of issues.

Kvinna till Kvinna has picked up on the need of the younger generation to create its own networks in the region, and is making special efforts to target the younger generation of the women's movement and increase the space for them. There is a large interest in meeting others in the region, and Hanna Sällström emphasises that the meetings often lead to insights and understanding necessary for peacebuilding. Targeting the younger generation is an important step in the process of phasing out of the Balkans, which Kvinna till Kvinna has already begun. The experience from the Balkans – that the involvement of women's organisations in the peace work is necessary in order to build a durable peace – is applied in the new regions where the organisation is becoming involved, and in its international advocacy work. In the last decade or so, this insight has also become institutionalised through the framework on women's participation in peace processes established by UN resolution 1325 and its successors.

– Our original ideas have been substantiated. From the Balkans, we will take with us the knowledge that there are always fantastic women's organisations, doing an amazing job. This is obvious for us, but not for all other actors, says Hanna Sällström.

Another key lesson is the importance of being flexible in planning. The prognoses for the democratic development in the Balkans were more optimistic than the actual results.

– The economic crisis is hitting the Balkans hard. We see how the troubled economy is breeding populist and nationalist politicians in Europe, and we will most likely see more of this in the Balkans as well. And we know very well what happens to women's rights when such political groups gain support, says Hanna Sällström.

Translated by Jakob Samuelsson



PHOTO: CHRISTINA WASSHOLM

In July 1995 more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslims, mainly men and boys, were killed in the town of Srebrenica (Bosnia and Herzegovina) by units of the Army of Republika Srpska. Women in Black commemorate the victims at Trg Republike in central Belgrade, Serbia, urging that they never be forgotten.