

Wartime division in peacetime schools

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An ethnically divided educational system in Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to limit sustainable return, and to hamper reconciliation and the reconstruction of society.

The inclusion of Annex 7 in the Dayton Accords was seminal in many ways but, while the return of property to the original rightful owners was enormously successful, the return of people to their pre-war homes was not such a success. This was particularly so in the many cases in which a returnee would now be in a demographic minority in their pre-war community. There was little or no effort by political leaders to create a genuinely welcoming environment for the return of pre-war inhabitants or to jump-start post-war political reconciliation. Minority return remained a daunting prospect, with returnees having difficulty finding work in their pre-war communities, and facing significant discrimination in terms of social relations and in terms of access to public services such as health care, police protection, social welfare – and schools.

The education system in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is a logical consequence of both the lack of meaningful and systemic political reconciliation over the past two decades, and the practical public policy implications of the power-sharing state structure agreed at Dayton. The country's education infrastructure was not immune from the new devolved, fragmented and, some would say, convoluted structure. Schools continued providing instruction with the same ethnically exclusive character as during the war.¹

In the absence of any state-level Ministry of Education to coordinate or drive educational policy, the entity- and canton-level Ministries of Education worked along separate and unequal paths. As a result, virtually every school in BiH continues to have its own dominant ethnic 'flavour' representing the majority population in that community. This is manifest in the different curricula and textbooks for Bosniak, Croat and Serb schools, different holiday

celebrations and, in effect, the active and ongoing cultivation of different and often mutually incompatible worldviews.²

Different methods, same results

Where there are sufficiently mixed communities of Bosniaks and Croats in the Federation to make the simple imposition of one curriculum impossible, this has led to over 50 cases of 'two schools under one roof'. In these cases school buildings are 'shared', with different groups of students taught either the Bosniak or Croat curriculum in different wings, floors or shifts. In the handful of communities in the Republika Srpska (RS) that have seen sufficient return of non-Serbs, non-Serb students (primarily Bosniaks) study the RS curriculum unless there is a sufficient number of minority students to allow them to follow 'their' national group of subjects (NGS), including history, geography, mother tongue and religion, at which point they separate from their Serb peers for these subjects. Whether in homogenous or mixed areas, children are confronted with and taught mono-perspective narratives, and whether the divisions are visible (as with the '2-in-1' schools) or more subtle, the result is the same – a generation of young citizens with a meagre sense of their shared future in, or vision for, their country.

There was a period of time, particularly between 1999 and 2007, when educational reforms began to take shape. The needs of returnee children were explicitly recognised in the Interim Agreement on Accommodation of the Rights and Needs of Returnee Children, signed in 2002, which aimed to end the most blatant practices that prevented sustainable return. An effort to remove explicit hate speech from history textbooks began, and the most ethnically exclusive school names and symbols were removed. The 2-in-1 schools (themselves

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an 'interim' solution) were in some cases improved through a number of attempts at administrative unification. The state-level Ministry of Civil Affairs developed a small education portfolio; a state-level Education Agency was developed including an advisory capacity to ensure consistent curriculum standards and learning outcomes; and a Conference of Ministers of Education was established to advise, consult and coordinate.

However, in the absence of either a legal commitment to increasingly harmonise and integrate educational systems, or the political will to press for such an inclusive agenda, these bodies have been greatly limited in their work, and such reforms failed to touch the core problem of the divided curricula and the broader continued policy of ethnification of public life in BiH.³

In such a system, minority returnees have remained minorities, forced to choose to assimilate, to study separately (if there are sufficient numbers of returnees) or, perhaps, to move, giving up on the idea of return. In the past few years, reforms have stopped and there are even signs of regression. For example, in the RS, in 2013, parents in the village of Konjević Polje (not far from Srebrenica) pulled their children out of school and organised demonstrations in Sarajevo (including an ad hoc tent city where some of the protestors slept) in protest against RS policies and practices that required their children to study the RS curriculum.

The Bosniak parents were not, however, demanding a more inclusive school approach for both Bosniak and Serb students but their own Bosniak curricular subjects – thereby also buying into the dominant separation narrative. This case exemplifies the dynamics of exclusionism and extremism that have come to dominate policy debates. The RS authorities did not take steps to accommodate these demands, and have instead reinforced division and ethno-national tensions by insisting that those few schools that do offer the NGS option (around 20 schools) refer to the "language of the Bosniak people" rather than the "Bosnian language", further reinforcing the problems of a country that consists of 'constituent peoples' rather than citizens.⁴

Conclusion

In the absence of international pressure or grassroots demands to revisit the country's divisive educational system and policies, there is no reason to believe that the country's schools will improve or become more broadly inclusive; the status quo suits the ruling nationalist political parties who are resistant to more civic options that could weaken their own hold on power. In the long term this will both threaten the return that has occurred to date and effectively close the door to any future returns.

Inclusion of the right to return in the Dayton Peace Agreement was a noble ideal that in many ways fell victim to the *Realpolitik* of the post-war Dayton state. Those persons displaced by the war who have remade their lives elsewhere have little incentive to return to a country that remains in a state of frozen conflict, exemplified by its divided education system. Twenty years after Dayton, this state of affairs should be of concern not only to people interested in the Balkans but also to those working to stabilise diverse post-war states in other parts of the world. Far from being a 'soft' policy matter, education in a post-war state is a security issue that it is perilous to ignore.

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