

Bosnia-Herzegovina: Nasa Stranka, a multi-ethnic and social-liberal political party

Friday 12 January 2018, by [HEINTZ Andy](#), [KOJOVIC Predrag](#) (Date first published: 9 January 2018).

Predrag Kojovic is the president of Nasa Stranka (Our Party) in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Nasa Stranka is a multi-ethnic political party of a social-liberal orientation that believes in solidarity, social justice and broad civil liberties.

Andy Heintz - How difficult was it to develop a multi-ethnic party in Bosnia-Herzegovina after the brutal wars in Bosnia and Serbia?

Predrag Kojovic - As you can imagine, it was very, very hard. Nationalism scars social tissue of society in such a way that its recovery apart from intense nourishment requires additional time, courage and luck. It is particularly difficult if the conflict ended without a military winner and the perpetrators of crimes are not held responsible and are walking freely among their victims, or are even glorified by their side. Then you add to all that a monumental failure of international community to apply its own principles to the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina. We are a social liberal party, which by definition means we're not nationalists. It's hard to convert people who still have strong nationalist feelings. I'm counting mostly on the younger generation. Some people are too wounded by the war in the 1990s to recover and move forward.

What kind of culture needs to flourish to prevent something like the Omarska concentration camp or the genocide in Srebrenica from ever happening again?

I believed that we would never see the images of people held, tortured and killed behind barbed wire after the Second World War in Europe. But we did. I do not know the answer but I hold on to remedies that worked the best so far - functioning democracy based on the highest standards of human rights.

Have most Serbs accepted that between 7,000 and 8,000 unarmed Bosniaks were killed in Srebrenica?

The majority of Serbs don't accept it, especially the older generation. Young people and other Serbs have shown great bravery in challenging this acceptance in places where other Serbs can be very violent towards those who accept that what happened in Srebrenica happened.

What institutions can be set up to dissuade people from being influenced by ethnic exclusivism and nationalism?

The most important state institution for prevention of that kind of evil is our schools if the curriculum is not written by nationalists or extremists of some other kind. Unfortunately, now we have schools that teach exactly that - nationalism. You get a bigger percentage of good people with

a good education system. Good education teaches you to question everything. I think education is our best chance.

Fortunately, schools are not the only sources of information kids have today. They roam the Internet and it counters the influence of educational propaganda and their parents.

What do you think were the key factors that made people, particularly the Serb militias (but, to a lesser extent, Bosniaks and Croats as well), capable of perpetuating such horrific violence in the Balkan wars?

Well, that's the question that has been haunting me for a long time. What turns your neighbor - you used to leave your kids with them when you were busy - into the killer. I do not know the answer but I can see that it's been done over and over again and not just in this part of the world. Or maybe the struggle between the good and evil is in fact a struggle between modern and primitive. It's very possible to make killers out of very ordinary people. It's amazing how the public is brought into that psychological state.

What were some factors that undergirded the Bosnian Serbs' violence during the Bosnian War from 1992-1995?

About 90 percent of the Serbs were mobilized in the 1990s to defend Yugoslavia. Franco Tudjman also was the elected president in Croatia and he was very militant. Everything in the country looked like 1941 when the Nazi-backed Ustase government remorselessly persecuted Jews, Serbs, Gypsies and Croat anti-fascists. Now the Serbs saw themselves as fighting to defend Yugoslavia and against the Croatian Nazi state of 1941. When the Serbs got around to Bosnia they no longer knew what they were fighting for.

Does the atmosphere that allowed the Balkans to explode into violence in the '90s still exist today, or have there been positive steps made to mitigate the tensions between the Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs?

Violence, in order to be "successful", requires political mobilization but also resources, like arms and military organization capable of performing killing in an organized way. The resources part is missing today but the rhetoric for political mobilization is still around.

Also, I do not believe that many people would volunteer, especially those who did before. Steps that would permanently take us away from that possibility require political courage that our current leaders do not have. We are still waiting for our Willy Brant.

Can you talk about the Bosnian, Serb and Croatian concentration and prisoner camps during the Bosnian Wars?

There were camps used by all sides. Bosnian camps were prisoner camps that included some civilians as well, but Serbian camps were concentration camps. The difference between the three groups is that ethnic cleansing and genocide was the official policy of the Serbian government while the Bosnian government tried to deal with crimes committed by the Bosnian army. The Serbs were responsible for the most crimes, with the Croats coming in second and the Muslims third. Ethnicity determined your fate at Serb checkpoints. The genocide in Srebrenica was a complex military operation. They surrounded it on all sides, handcuffed Muslims and killed them. It was against the laws of war. They killed 9,000 people.

Gender inequality has become a big issue around the world. What is Nasa Stranka doing to promote gender equality in your country?

Our party has been for years running an internal program that we call “Initiative 50 percent”. That’s our policy when it comes to forming party structure as well as when we form the list of candidates for the elections. I’d say we’ve been very successful in that. Unfortunately, there is a stark contrast between what we are doing regarding gender equality and what others and the society in general are doing.

What is Nasa Stranka doing to push back against the widespread discrimination the Roma is facing in Bosnia-Herzegovina?

It is part of a struggle for equality for all citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina also known as “Sejdic-Finci”. Sejdic-Finci relates to a court case brought to the European Court of Human Rights by Roma activist Dervo Sejdic and Jakob Finci, who is Jewish. They argued the Bosnian Constitution that was negotiated as part of the Dayton Peace Accords that ended the Bosnian War discriminated against Roma, Jews and other minority parties because certain electoral posts like the tripartite presidency could only be held by Serbs, Croats and Muslims. The court decided in favor of Sejdic and Finci and Bosnia’s leaders said they would fix the problem, but they have yet to do so. However, we do recognize that the Roma ethnic group is particularly vulnerable and representatives in legislative bodies often bring up Roma issues and demand action from the government regarding their position, or more precisely, the lack of their presence in the educational and government system.

Has the Bosnia Herzegovina government taken any steps to end the racial and ethnic discrimination that keeps the Roma, Jews and other minorities from running for political office?

Nasa Stranka did, and only in Kanton Sarajevo, which is our stronghold. We changed the Constitution and applied Sejdic - Finci court ruling years ago. So, Sarajevo is the only place where people who belong or do not belong to certain ethnic groups have equal political rights and can run for local offices regardless of their ethnic or religious background.

Do you believe the government has done enough to defend freedom of assembly and freedom of speech in Bosnia-Herzegovina?

Not at all. The examples of cases in which government denied this right are so numerous that I do not know where to start. The most often used scenario is when they allow a gathering of let’s say the LGBT population and then don’t provide protection and expose them to violence by “unorganized groups of citizens”.

Is Nasa Stranka satisfied with how your country’s court system has tried people suspected of committing atrocities during the wars in the Balkans?

In such a widely corrupted state, the court system cannot be an exception. National parties infiltrated the judicial system with party soldiers who then made political decisions in legal cases. As a matter of fact, the judicial system became one of, if not the biggest, obstacle to both justice and reforms. It is unfortunate that the judicial system has been built and is still controlled by the international community and their inadequate representatives.

Having witnessed the violence in Bosnia, are you worried about the rise of Far-Right political groups in Europe and the United States?

I’m very concerned about the rise of the Right in Europe and the United States and I think Europe is at risk of having something similar happen there as what happened in Bosnia. The most serious danger is to find comfort in the belief that this cannot happen here.

How will the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina build less corrupt political parties and address its problems in the future?

The kids will do okay once they get into power. I think this will eventually be like a normal middle European party.

P.S.

* This interview will be included in Andy Heintz's upcoming book *Dissidents of the International Left*.

* Andy Heintz is a freelance journalist who has been published in the Culture Project, Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres, Foreign Policy in Focus, Secularism is a Women's Issue, Balkan Witness and CounterVortex.