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Cross-communal acts of commemoration designed to promote peace at a local level in Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Abstract: This essay describes two distinct senses in which local remembrance activities are used to build peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina: to counter nationalist conflict narratives and to demonstrate cross-communal recognition on the local level. The existing literature on such activism in Bosnia-Herzegovina foregrounds the objective conditions in which the combination of memory activism and peacebuilding is necessary as a counter to the uses made of remembrance by the main ethnonationalist parties to justify their divisive rule. The article draws on the concepts of Michael Rothberg—multidirectional memory and implicated subjectivity—to show how the divergent forms of local peacebuilding and memory activities imply choices which also have a subjective, relational element. To enable the reader to understand these choices, the article first reviews the historical, political, and social conditions faced by activists. Secondly, it explores ways in which the subjective, relational dimensions of these choices are also keys to understanding ways in which their variety and their engagement with local realities are not captured in objectivising literature on peacebuilding and memory work.

Keywords: Bosnia-Herzegovina, politics and remembrance, local peacebuilding, implicated subjects, generations.

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Introduction

A select number of civil society initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina have in recent years used remembrance practices as a tool for peacebuilding. Two distinct forms of peacebuilding are evident, and to describe them requires a conceptual framework that embraces more relational dimensions of these activities than is common in the peacebuilding literature. Advocates of a more oppositional approach to peacebuilding have argued that such activities are critical to build a culture of memory that counters the (ab)uses of memory in ethnonationalist politics; a second set of activities represent the pursuit of peace as a gradual socialisation process, and do not adopt a deliberately oppositional stance. This essay draws on Michael Rothberg's recent publications on relational dimensions to the combination of peacebuilding and memory work in order to cast light on the premises and the choices made in such peacebuilding practices.

First, the context in which peacebuilding and memory work is set with a brief overview of divergent perspectives on the violence of the recent past. The challenges of memory and peacebuilding work in Bosnia-Herzegovina are further complicated by the fact that there is no immediate prospect of an agreed history or political analysis on the basis of which actors may converge.

Second, the premises for combining memory and peacebuilding activity are examined in relation to the developing academic literature. This introduction gives a conceptual context for the application of this literature to the distinctive situation faced in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Since the nature of peacebuilding in Bosnia-Herzegovina is the subject of continuing dispute, the essay examines the ways in which the agency of activists and their community partners are understood from two perspectives—the critical peacebuilding literature and the work on memory activism developed by Michael Rothberg. The objective and subjective and relational strategies they suggest are then used to reflect on recent attempts to combine memory and peace activism in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The next sections of the essay then probe divergent interpretations of the political and social contexts and their reflections in the design of peacebuilding and memory activities. Where some observers emphasise that the conflict narratives associated with the largest political parties have important or deep social roots, others see the remembrance events associated with these conflict narratives as of real interest only to relatively distinct and small political elites. Twenty-five years later, what 'memory' means is also very different for those who experienced the war and for younger citizens who did not directly experience it. Some analysts observe that the lack of a culture of memory presents new challenges for the communication of peaceful forms of

remembrance to the new generations. It may alternatively be asserted that the primary challenge lies in the need for multiple forms of memory work for successive generations in different locations across the country.

The essay finally addresses the local dimension of those cross-communal commemoration experiments which seek to advance peace at a local level. The distinctive challenges of creating recognition and solidarity across divided local communities produce a different dynamic for joint remembrance activities than exists at the wider state level. The present discussion examines some of the local peacebuilding activities. The aim is to discern the respects in which attempts to perform acts of mutual recognition, away from the political tensions over conflict narratives which press on actors at the state level, can be better understood, drawing on Rothberg's notions of implicated subjects and multidirectional memory.[1]

A brief note to introduce my own perspective and involvement. I have worked since 2011 with a diversity of academic peacebuilders from Bosnia and Herzegovina and its neighbours, and over the course of that time have been part of a research team which has completed a series of studies of attitudes to peacebuilding in thirteen towns and cities across the country.[2] The framing of the obstacles and opportunities for memory and peacebuilding work presented here is intended to reflect their gritty realism and determination to enact long-term change. The article is not, however, intended as a validation of peacebuilding activities, but as an attempt to describe the choices of peacebuilders with sensitivity to the contexts in which they are conceived.

Narratives of conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina

The conditions in which memory work and peacebuilding activism are combined in Bosnia-Herzegovina are vigorously contested across the country, with the effect that activism is easily dismissed or viewed as having marginal impact. As a first step towards clarifying how this activism works from the perspective of activists, some preliminary comment on this narrative contest and on the distinctive conditions in Bosnia before, during, and after the killings of the 1990s is necessary.

[1] Michael Rothberg (2019).

[2] The first two are online: George Wilkes *et al.* (2013), *Factors in Reconciliation: Religion, Local Conditions, People and Trust* (https://relwar.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/edinburg-eng1.pdf), and George Wilkes *et al.* (2012), *Reconciliation and Trust-building in Bosnia-Herzegovina: A Survey of Popular Attitudes in Four Cities and Regions* (https://relwar.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/edinburg-engweb2.pdf). Two further studies are forthcoming: Davor Marko *et al.*(2021), *Reconciliation—Means to Fight Insecurity or Resist the Politics of Division: Citizens in 13 BiH Local Communities Talk about Reconciliation and Trust Building Processes*, and Ana Zotova *et al.* (2021), *Building Trust and Reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Perspectives from Stakeholders*.

A hundred thousand citizens were killed between the onset of armed conflict in 1992 and the Dayton Accords of November 1995.[3] To describe this as a civil war offends citizens from across the country who experienced the fighting as a war of aggression and a genocide, involving hostile forces from outside Bosnia's borders and enabled by the international community.[4] The largest number of dead by far (82 per cent, according to the count in the *Bosnian Book of the Dead*) were Bosnian Muslims, and the conditions in which this happened mean that the extent to which Bosnian Muslims were targets of genocide across the country, and not only in Srebrenica and the UN 'safe zones', remains the subject of different understandings. Many Serbs and Croats also view their plight as the result of a deliberate genocide, unrecognised by the international community. Thousands of citizens from all backgrounds were interned and appallingly mistreated in camps and prisons. Two million citizens were displaced. Even after the Dayton Accords brought an end to the armed conflict, the process of ethnic cleansing continued as refugees sought security, minorities were subjected to various forms of arms-backed pressure to leave, and the displaced were blocked from returning to their former homes. The continuation of genocide by these means has remained a live issue in public interventions made by Bosnian Muslims long after the end of armed conflict.[5] Weapons were no longer firing, but for many the conflict is live—it is not a 'post-conflict'.

Engaged observers have never shared narratives about the nature of the armed conflict and of the plight of civilians at the hands of ethnic cleansing.[6] Some observers, with the prominent public figure Jakob Finci, do not accept that any functional post-war definition of the killing can have purchase across the public sphere, such is the entrenched nature of the war of narratives.[7] Chaos encouraged the speed at which atrocities spread across the country. Locally, the nature of conflict changed greatly, often month by month. Very different situations were experienced across the country —and those who remained in their homes had quite different experiences to the millions displaced or imprisoned. The memories they hold often do not fit neatly with the narratives of the local political leadership, let alone the narratives of the more distant leadership which claims to represent their national group at the higher political levels, in Sarajevo, in Pale and Banja Luka, or in Mostar.

[3] The most widely recognised count, based on extensive research, is given by Mirsad Tokača *et al.* (2013).
[4] For a scholarly counterblast to the notion that this was a civil war, see Josip Glaurdic (2011). For an accessible introductory history of the war, see Noel Malcolm (1996).
[5] For example, CNN (2010).
[6] The contest over terminology is usefully addressed in relation to 'objectivising' historical publications in David Campbell (1998).
[7] Jessie Barton-Hronešová (2020: 116).

In these conditions, it may be argued that a policy of deliberate amnesia—in the style of David Rieff's 2016 *In Praise of Forgetting*—would be preferable to any form of memory work that could be seen as partisan, and which is likely to be seen as partial in its coverage. In parts of society, versions of this view may be more common, and a wide range of critical observers have argued that in practice crimes are treated with amnesia by the political class.[8] Amnesia has nevertheless not been a popular argument in the post-war public sphere in Bosnia-Herzegovina—partly in view of the criminality of combatant actions, partly because victims' groups organised in all parts of the country have opposed amnesties for their persecutors, and partly in view of the threat of future repetition.[9]

The memory of violence is perpetuated in the political and the social spheres, though this may be understood in different ways. The war, the ethnic cleansing, and the genocide of the 1990s remain regular features of the political discourse of the political parties and their associated media.[10] The continued competition between former armed adversaries is one of the primary tools used in electoral competition, and political conflict over wartime enmity is reheated before every major election in the country, a point underlined in the scholarship on peacebuilding treated next. Judgements about how far these discourses are shared beyond the political elite may have a determining influence on memory and peacebuilding activities. While some memories of local violence can be ever-present, others may be deliberately repressed, and the impact of public and private trauma naturally implies memories which are silent rather than silenced—Stef Jansen has indicated the impact of these different patterns in accounts from nearby villages in Croatia,[11] as have Monika Palmberger and Dino Abazović in commentaries focused on Bosnia-Herzegovina.[12] There remains a gap between the literatures on social memory and public and political behaviour in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and this affects assessments of the relationship between memory and peacebuilding activity. It is far from clear that voting habits reflect the wartime memories of the older generations, and, insofar as they do, wartime service and support for the main ethnonationalist parties do not correlate with opposition to peacebuilding activity.[13] To add to this, the younger generations have no personal memories of pre-war Yugoslavia, nor personal memories of the violence and deprivation of the 1990s. The assumptions made in interpretations of the political and social

[8] See further in, for instance, Barton-Hronešová (2020).
[9] Louise Mallinder (2009).
[10] See, for example, Centre for Nonviolent Action (2016: 8, 33).
[11] Stef Jansen (2002).
[12] Inter alia, Monika Palmberger (2016) and Dino Abazović (2014), treated further below.
[13] George Wilkes *et al.* (2013: esp. 50, 54–5).

realities which activists seek to change, and which have a determining impact on their agency, are explored further in subsequent sections of the essay.

Applying recent academic literature on memory and sustainable peacebuilding activism to developments in Bosnia-Herzegovina

A deliberately 'critical' literature on peacebuilding and reconciliation has grown greatly in the past two decades.[14] In this body of scholarly literature, the pretensions of external peacebuilders to support a liberal approach to peace based on democratic values is contrasted with the importance of conceiving peace as being built through local agency, norms, and interests.[15] In some of this work, local memory is seen to be overridden or ignored in peacebuilding or reconciliation interventions, and much literature argues against the two concepts completely.[16] Against the pretensions of reconciliation activity to deliver peace for victims, critics such as Thomas Brudholm, for instance, have asserted the right of victims to insist on public respect for their memory, and—as Brudholm puts it—to maintain their rightful resentment of wrongs done to them.[17] Peacebuilding and reconciliation discourses meet similar objections in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Critics may see abstract political discourse about peace and reconciliation as an irrelevance, as a political subterfuge, or as a personal threat. By contrast, a body of academic and activist literature on the transformation of post-conflict trauma embraces the need for peacebuilding and memory work in Bosnia-Herzegovina and internationally—eloquent representations of which are gathered in a recent volume edited by Julianne Funk.[18] In this work, it is commonly judged that the only escape for society from the cycle of violence is to address traumatic suffering deliberately.[19] For scholars who instead address the transmission of memory and its political and social resonance as more complex—more complex in contextual terms and more subject to the diverse forms of agency and to the subjective positions taken towards memory by agents—this equation between trauma and the repetition of violence may appear less automatic. This is the space into which Michael Rothberg has stepped with his *Multidirectional Memory* (2009) and *The Implicated Subject* (2019).

Rothberg's work is used below in discussion of the agency and subjective position of memory and peace activists working at the local level in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

[14] For a review of the range of dimensions of this literature, see, for example, Roger Mac Ginty (2014).
[15] See, for example, Stefanie Kappler & Oliver Richmond (2011).
[16] See, for example, Thomas Brudholm (2008) and Valerie Rosoux (2018).
[17] Brudholm (2008).
[18] For example, Julianne Funk *et al.* (2020).
[19] See especially chapters 1 and 2 in Funk *et al*. (2020).

His work is deliberately intended to work across divergent contexts, encompassing social and political divisions after the Holocaust, after slavery in the USA, in South Africa, and in Israel/Palestine. Rothberg constructs memory activism as a normative alternative to the preservation of narratives which oppose perpetrators and victims. The application of multidirectional memory in Bosnia could consequently reflect the opposition of many peacebuilders to the competition of memories over the war in Bosnia and elsewhere in the Former Yugoslavia, as Stephanie Edwards has argued.[20] Arriving at a satisfactory alternative to the opposition between perpetrator and victim is not easy, however. In this essay we are seeking to address the respects in which multidirectionality and implicated subjectivity may work in a Bosnian context, in which social and political realities weigh heavily on trust in any narratives about peacebuilding and memory work. Rothberg's work is certainly useful insofar as he takes the normative dimension of this discursive competition seriously. His concept of 'implicated subject' in principle allows space for the normative demands of all parties involved in encounters that cross divisions over memory of violence. In Rothberg's view of the implicated subject, all are 'implicated' in structural violence, and for this reason we are not solely set against each other by the choices of perpetrators to enact violence. To elaborate on what it is that creates relationships which are capable of transforming conflict over memory, Rothberg describes the making of collective memory as 'multidirectional', involving potentially all those who are engaged in memory-making, as activists, or as members of society, and as individuals responding to very different conflicts and contexts. This point, in principle, responds neatly to the ways in which individuals and communities across Bosnia-Herzegovina hold divergent memories of conflict and violence to be relevant to their identity and their future. This normative framework could easily appear utopian. The multidirectional space for encounter between agents of change who are jointly implicated may, as some critics of Rothberg's work have noted, best be seen as an ideal, or as an objective, for peacebuilders to aim at, rather than as a template for describing what in fact takes place when memory and peacebuilding work bring different social groups and generations together.[21] It will be suggested below, through reflection on commemoration activity in Bosnia-Herzegovina, that sceptics and critics of this work may still see use for a multidirectional perspective insofar as it makes the subjective and relational nature of memory and peacebuilding work visible. It will be suggested that Rothberg's process of 'implication'—because it focuses on subjective, relational processes, and does not skip quickly from assertions of wrongs to objectives for future harmony—may help to cast light on very different

[20] Stephanie C. Edwards (2020).
[21] For example, David Tollerton (2020: 175).

forms of peacebuilding and memory activity, without validating particular normative discourses or processes of socialisation.

Trends in commemoration: politics and commemorative peacebuilding activities

The number of commemorative peacebuilding activities began to grow in Bosnia-Herzegovina around 2010, fifteen years after the war ended. Their objective is widely framed[22] as a reaction against the use of wartime commemoration by the largest political parties to stoke support from the three constituent peoples, Bosniak, Croat, and Serb. Acts of commemoration which contrast to the normative ethnonational remembrance narratives may be seen as acts of dissent and sometimes of courage, the more so if they are represented as standing against not only the hold exercised by a small set of political elites over the public sphere in the country, but also a widespread social pressure favouring continued distance across ethnonational divides. The pressure exercised on the public sphere and at community level—and the question of whether this should be seen as political, or both political and social—is of central importance in understanding the strategies of memory and peacebuilding activists in the country.

The political commemoration of key events during the war and genocide of the 1990s is partly shaped by the institutional forms fixed in the Dayton Accords of 1995, which divided the state into two larger territorial entities, the Federation and the Republika Srpska, as well as the District of Brčko. There is a considerable and growing academic literature on the political use of commemoration to stoke fear and thereby to exercise control over the aspirations and votes of the country's once mixed, and now largely nationally separated, population. This literature paints numerous respects in which these commemorations are effectively divisive.[23] The traumatic events of the war are relived annually, and at significant times of year, marking the founding of each political entity, or the commission of atrocities. Commemoration is used to stoke fear and hostility, both by opportunistic political leaders from all of the largest parties and by smaller communities dedicated to a hardline ideology marked by Croat, Bosniak, or Serb nationalism. While leaders who seek to project a responsible attitude may distance themselves from a hostile discourse, formal commemorative activities nevertheless continue to proceed on the basis that each of the constituent

[22] For example, Nerzuk Ćurak (2016); Centre for Nonviolent Action (2016).

[23] See, among many publications treating this, the interesting article by a Sarajevo-based remembrance and peacebuilding practitioner, Nicholas Moll (2013).

parts of the state must mark its own wartime experience by itself, without recognition of the different perspectives of other parts of the population. One of the best known proponents of peacebuilding activity in the country, Nerzuk Ćurak, a political science professor at the University of Sarajevo, critiques this culture of politicised remembrance in the strongest terms: far from constituting a culture of memory, these commemorative markers preserve the violence in the institutional structures which divided the population; they rest on a culture of denial of the rights, perspectives, and experiences of the other which is in itself violent; and they grip the population in emotional trauma with the purpose of preserving the elite interests which unleashed the war in the first place.[24] Professor Ćurak argues that a culture of peace cannot co-exist with these structures. A peaceful, inclusive, multicultural 'Bosnian' society should proceed from a rejection of the culture of violent commemorations altogether. It would be better, he argues, for children to go on exchanges between the separate entities and to create a Bosnian culture of memory together. Critics of this form of peacebuilding in the country may view this either as unrealistic, as Leftist, or as deliberately favouring a majoritarian perspective, a formula which from a Serb and Croat nationalist perspective is widely seen to reflect only a Bosniak/Muslim interest.[25]

Peacebuilders working with this oppositional approach counter the ethnonationalism of the commemorations of each camp with an affirmation that these politicised activities are not an extension of popular collective memory, but rather the denial of a culture of popular memory. This is a leitmotif in the activism and publications of another leading advocate of commemorative peacebuilding, Adnan Hasanbegović, a former veteran who founded a movement of (mostly left-of-centre) veterans-turned-peacebuilders, from all of the formerly opposed combatant forces, and created the Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA) in Sarajevo as a vehicle for their collaboration. Hasanbegović—like Professor Ćurak—distinguishes between the monumental form of nationalist and militarist commemoration activity, that is the official representative commemorations in which civic leaders from the main political parties praise heroic wartime sacrifices in the abstract, but ordinary victims are decentred, and a 'culture of memory', which he sees is lacking at a wider social level.[26] Seen from this critical perspective, the politicised nature of these nationalistic commemorations means that certain acts are commemorated with formal ceremonies, others excluded, and the

[24] Nerzuk Ćurak (2016).

[25] For a polemic against the use of Bosnian cultural history as a framework for memory work, suiting international donors but overlooking local traditions and sites of memory, see Tonka Kostadinova (2014).

[26] See, for example, Centre for Nonviolent Action (2016), which was co-authored by Adnan Hasanbegović and colleagues. For an overview of the academic literature on cultures of memory on which Hasanbegović and Ćurak draw, see Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nünning (2010).

choice is made in a manner to be expected of the patriarchal and hierarchical system which predominates in the main political parties. This means that official commemorations are often led by representatives of the former parties to conflict, and they therefore centre the narratives of these parties on wartime conflict and sacrifice. By contrast, the victimhood of the wider population is given the attention of political leaders primarily in symbolic and abstract terms: individuals may seek to represent categories of victims politically by identifying themselves as public faces of organisations aligned with one of the political causes which emerged through the armed conflict. These ethnonationally-homogenous organisations are widely represented in the formal commemorations. In practical terms, this abstraction makes striking politics insofar as many individual victims of the worst violence still do not have ready recognition or support, twenty-five years later. The political elites, which gain energy from the memories associated with those wartime causes, are sustained by hierarchies which have economic as well as social dimensions. Therein lies a structural violence which Hasanbegović, Ćurak, and other peacebuilders insist must be addressed if a real culture of peace is to be built. In this critical perspective, peacebuilding activities through commemoration should not only be encounters in which violent and peaceful memories are spoken of but the structures of violence are ignored. A different perspective would follow from Rothberg's account of peacebuilding and memory activism as a relational process which embraces contesting narratives. This would make sense of the perspective of insiders to those communities, for whom encounters which do not address political or structural violence may be valued as acts of humanisation. The choice for peacebuilders is whether first to prioritise rejection of past wrongs, or first to attempt the process of humanising victims as individuals. In Rothberg's account, this is a strategic choice relating to the process of change, and not only depending on judgements about wrongs or future objectives.

One reason for the oppositional approach prioritised in the activism of Hasanbegović, Ćurak, and their colleagues lies in their analysis of the hierarchies at work in social and political affairs. In the contrast between formal public acts of commemoration and more socially or culturally resonant acts of remembrance, the approach taken by Hasanbegović, Ćurak, and other advocates of alternative acts of remembrance reflects a perspective on the sociology of collective memory which is relatively hierarchical in its view of the social structures at work. It parallels, for example, the distinction between formal and informal, public and private, in Jay Winter's influential work on remembrance of the First World War.[27] This formal–informal distinction is often drawn starkly by the peace activists who adopt this critical approach in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In these circles, public events and the media are

[27] Jay Winter (2006).

seen to be dominated by a small grouping of partisan elites, and beyond that there is no organised public sphere. Winter uses fairly generalising terms in describing evidence of wider remembrance practices as reflections of the social agency of a survivor generation, and attributes a similar agency to later generations, again generalising, who were addressing their own changing needs and contexts through new remembrance practices. However, amongst activist circles in Bosnia this sense of agency is expressed through the acts of an equally small group of survivors whose peacebuilding and memory activism places them at the political and sometimes the social margins in their communities. The Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA) has one of the most public programmes tackling the shortcomings of remembrance, focused on acts of solidarity by veterans. As will be seen from their archives,[28] veterans from all sides of the conflict come together through the work of the CNA to attend otherwise mononational gatherings of veterans and to display the recognition that ordinary combatants share a common sense of victimhood: they are not the beneficiaries of the war, nor of the post-war regime. The solidarity amongst disillusioned veterans generated through the CNA has also led to widely recognised acts of solidarity between veteran associations in the two entities protesting against government neglect.[29] CNA activists are keenly aware of what Rothberg would describe as their implication—or their positionality—and use it to undermine the conflict narratives of political elites which they hold to be abusing their central political and social position.

The weight of political structures on memory activism is also a dimension of the CNA's work with younger generations, and the contrast between party political uses of remembrance and CNA activism shapes the aims and content of their educational activities. CNA veterans from each of the combatant forces have been a much-used resource for the Living Library (*Živa biblioteka*) events, arranged in localities across the country by Pro-Budućnost.[30] At the local level, where young people grow up in communities that are separated by ethnonationalist conflict narratives, the veterans of the Living Libraries nevertheless see the prospect of building understanding based on their individual testimonies, often local perspectives, addressing the real local contexts in which they meet. As CNA speakers testify to the horrors of war, they also attest to the lack of connection between divisive political elite interests and the experience and welfare of ordinary veterans, and of their local communities.

The extent to which the CNA and other peacebuilders choose to focus on conflict in their work at the local level also deserves attention. The bold discourse of CNA activists can be contrasted with the continuing limitation of steps towards reconciliation

[28] Online at https://nenasilje.org/en/reports/

[29] See, for example, Aida Cerkez (2012).

[30] Reports of these events are searchable on https://www.probuducnost.ba/

at the elite level. From the CNA's perspective, this is natural, since the elites are the defining power behind the most influential public institutions and media, and their interests are not served by undermining their conflicting narratives about the war. Taking a step away from the objective analysis offered by this activist circle, other perspectives may be held to be responsible for the extent to which CNA activists can be far more direct about the continuing impact of political conflict on individual lives than many peacebuilding initiatives which work at the elite level. To take one of the most notable attempts to advance the public commemoration of civilian victims from all sides and of all nations to date as a vehicle for this discussion: in 2017, the Religious Leaders Council brought the most senior religious figures of the country together to tour sites of atrocity committed against civilians of all three of the main constituent peoples in the 1990s. Hitherto, the Religious Leaders Council had been very deliberate in differentiating its public reconciliation work from the political sphere. On this occasion, they were nevertheless accompanied by the media and by political leaders from a second tier, rather than the most senior party leaders. During the tour, the announced intention of the religious leaders was stressed, to offer their respective prayers rather than speeches.[31] Interventions addressed to the press by the religious leaders were deliberate about the lack of progress made in reconciliation by political leaders, and were firm in condemning the wartime civilian murders as criminal acts, but equally carefully they did not differentiate between the nationalities of perpetrators, insisting that the innocent civilian victims were equally victims. The public act of peace and reconciliation, as the Religious Leaders Council conceived it, was carefully limited by a sense of their roles in relation to public and political life. Viewed in this framing, they were bold—the Serbian bishop in particular. This was not simply the act of functionaries serving a self-justifying public structure that was based on conflict alone. It might better capture the self-imposed limits on the action of the Religious Leaders Council to view its actions through a lens in which structures or systems are not self-explanatory, but are reproduced through the kind of reflected activity outlined above; in this light, the religious leaders were cautious about taking steps that might seem to undermine the beliefs of large sectors of public opinion, limiting risks in the view that the public sphere is not controlled by a fixed structure or elite, but they were also bold in their statements about the need for political change based on common principles, in sharp distinction to the positions taken by political leaders.[32]

The self-imposed limits or the constraints on political leaders are greater still. Whereas the most senior regional leaders have made a show of their penitence and

[31] Igor Spaic (2017).

[32] For an example of such a perspective on systems of conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, see Nansen Dialogue Centre (2015).

recognition of the victims of other communities through visits to sites of atrocity—most notably the visit of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to Srebrenica in 2015[33] and the visits of successive Croatian presidents to Ahmići in Central Bosnia in 2010 and 2018[34]—the most senior Bosnian Serb, Bosniak, and Croat leaders have not taken such steps. At a more local level, we will see examples of politicians who make efforts to show their recognition of the experiences and perspectives of other communities by attending remembrance events in their area, but this is not being done by political parties in a systematic way.

Social attitudes to memory and peacebuilding activities

The pressure exerted by political party elites can be understood as a structural or systemic constraint on reconciliation activity. Peacebuilding and memory theorists may understand this systemic influence in competing ways: as broadly reflective of wider society, or as a distinct imposition on popular attitudes.[35] While observers may gain impressions about the nature of this social dimension from immersion in a community, or from public sources, there are complications in generalising from either: individuals do not easily share their considered reflections on peacebuilding activities, even within their own families and communities, because the associated emotions and relationships are sensitive;[36] the attitudes individuals hold on peacebuilding activities may differ according to whether they are associated with the private, the communal, or the public and political sphere, to contested spaces or to locations identified as home; and attitudes to the social and political changes implied in peacebuilding and memory activism in the abstract do not necessarily match responses to the practical experience of these events. For activists who seek impact through activities geared at different generations, additional challenges apply, as the experiences of those who lived through the violence of the 1990s are dramatically different from the experiences of the younger generations.

In 2012, the research team with which I have worked surveyed 616 individuals from four cities, and in 2013, we surveyed another 2060 individuals from thirteen cities across Bosnia-Herzegovina.[37] Participants responded to questions about their attitudes to a wide range of reconciliation activities and priorities. My purpose in relating some of the findings here lies in the extent to which they diverged from prior

[33] BBC News (2015).
[34] DW (2010); IBNA (2018).
[35] Nansen Dialogue Centre (2015).
[36] Dino Abazović (2014).
[37] George Wilkes *et al.* (2012, 2013).

expectations, set by literature which either emphasises the strength of ethnonationalist social and political narratives or which suggests that support for peacebuilding and transitional justice would be greatest amongst the most educated.[38] Both surveys indicated strong support for peacebuilding activities, particularly those which involved ordinary people. The second survey investigated attitudes to different types of peacebuilding activity in greater detail. To summarise a few points germane to the understanding of how social and political factors relate to attitudes to peacebuilding and memory work, a general pattern presents itself. The strength of the support expressed for forward-looking peacebuilding activities was generally above 70 per cent of respondents across the thirteen locations. By contrast, support for activities which would investigate the causes and consequences of the war, or which would involve apologies from political leaders or justice for war criminals, was consistently around 40 per cent across the country. The popularity of memory and peacebuilding activities was consistent across the population's national and religious divides. The respondents also trusted ordinary local actors to advance reconciliation activities far more than they indicated trust in political or religious leaders—again, the contrasting figures were above 70 per cent and above 40 per cent. Insofar as the figures spoke to a distance from the elected political elite felt across the population, this was shared as strongly by the voters for the large parties as by both the smaller number of voters for non-nationalist parties and the large proportion of citizens—one third—who declared they did not vote. It may be inferred from the data that politically controversial issues relating to the armed conflict, and elite political involvement in activity framed in terms of peacebuilding and reconciliation, were favoured or trusted by fewer respondents. Even so, support for youth visits to sites of atrocity, and for dialogues involving youth and veterans, was extremely high, indicating that these were not divisive in the way that elite political activity was seen to be.[39]

The thirteen-city survey also offers a resource for assessing differences across generations.[40] The trend in favour of reconciliation and memory activities was far more emphatic amongst older respondents. Observers of contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina may see evidence for the disengaged attitude among the generations born after the war in many sources. These younger citizens have had their formative experiences in a segregated community, and often in segregated schooling. Public debate was stirred in 2015 when the documentary series *Perspektiva* talked with youth on either side of the divide in Mostar: though there is no physical barrier to stop them, interviewees talked about never crossing the river; their attitudes to the other

[38] Marta Valinas *et al.* (2009).
[39] See Wilkes *et al.* (2013: esp. 5–8, 16–25).
[40] Wilkes *et al.* (2013: esp. 59–60).

were distant, and they showed no nostalgia for the mixed city which Mostar had been before the 1990s.[41] As in Mostar, so too the reality in which young people live across the country is mostly distant from the ethnonational and the religious other. The exceptions are in parts of a relatively few cities where national groups continue to coexist. Memories of violence—which could be formative for older generations in the way that Monika Palmberger describes in her ethnographic investigation of generations and memory in Mostar[42]—are also a distant interest to the post-war youth, a point affirmed in reflection sessions following the survey's publication.[43] The challenge of understanding how these younger generations will receive memory and peacebuilding activities begins with evidence that members of these generations do not relate ethnonational loyalty to interest in remembrance, let alone to acts of remembrance conducted by the political parties. Whether the next generations will accept, reject, or emphasise conflict narratives, or whether the trend instead is to an even more distant disinterest, is not set in stone.

Grounded local commemorations

The turn to local cross-communal commemorations as peacebuilding instruments reflects both a search for spaces protected from the continuing post-conflict competition and also the realisation that a wide range of young interlocutors are best engaged where they live and where they are educated. Rothberg's work on the 'implicated subject' appeals as a tool for assessing the impact of memory work in these settings precisely because the subjectivity of those involved in these local encounters is foregrounded. By contrast, much of the peacebuilding and memory literature on which activities in Bosnia-Herzegovina have been based have used objectivising or generalising frameworks to explain the change required from a culture of violence to a culture of peace, based on common values, as Professor Ćurak describes it. The nature of local contexts has been a matter of relatively little interest in this vein of peacebuilding literature. A more deliberately subjective focus makes sense of the degree to which the diverse localities in which these activities are situated make quite distinctive environments for peacebuilding and multidirectional memory work. The prospects for achieving distance from the party political competition, or for engaging with the younger generation in their home environment, may prove to have little to do with distance from the largest centres of ethnonationalist political opinion.

[41] *Perspektiva* (2015).
[42] Monika Palmberger (2016).
[43] Davor Marko *et al.* (2021: section on Youth).

Quite different approaches to local peacebuilding work follow from choices to engage with or to transcend partisan conflict narratives. A bold attempt to set out the grounds for local peacebuilding based on patterns of grass-roots dialogue and sociality was presented by the Nansen Dialogue Centre in 2015, in a report which described local communities as distant enough from partisan conflict in the public sphere to be able to allow courageous individuals the freedom necessary to promote peaceful relations.[44] In focus group discussion in the smaller cities covered in our 2013 survey, locals emphasised that committed individual bridgebuilders made all the difference to the public reception of solidarity activities at the local level.[45] And yet they also attested that the pressure to respond to the conflict narratives applied within the party political sphere is also applied by party figures in towns and cities across the country, affecting the scope for cross-communal peacebuilding in civil society, in public schools, or in public sector employment.

The local also presents opportunities and challenges specific to activist circles focused on highlighting the negative influence of political structures at this level. The activities of the CNA, for instance, engage in or provide education about local commemorative activities to the degree that political structures remain a meaningful focus of conflict, or a foil for an embracingly inclusive political future for the country. What the local means in this work is affected by political networks that connect local and national or global actors, activists or their opponents. An example of a deliberately oppositional activism in which notions of implication very clearly play a central role is presented by the White Armband movement, centred on the annual memorialisation of killings in Prijedor, at the heart of the Republika Srpska.[46] The network of implication here is international: White Armband Day annually draws a 'translocal' network of activists to protest against the wider political structures which committed atrocities against civilians in Prijedor, and which continue to act against survivors in denying the atrocities or in shutting survivor voices down in the spaces in Prijedor in which they suffered or in which they seek redress. White Armband activists foreground political and economic ties which justify international involvement in countering denial at the site and more widely in the Republika Srpska. Even so, the local is the realm of greatest importance to the movement's political focus, and it is given the appearance of being defined in its public relations work by the fact that this is where victims were killed or driven out. Activists direct attention to local rather than to abstract victims, and remembrance activities in response have focused on the value for local communities of the humanisation of these victims, and on the

[44] Nansen Dialogue Centre (2015).
[45] This was highlighted in focus groups and public meetings covered in Davor Marko *et al.* (2021).
[46] Johanna Paul (2021).

obstruction posed by the focus on the agents of violence in party political remembrance.

Where organisations such as CNA have designed a programme of critical memory work for use across the state, premised on a common approach to past and present, more ostentatiously local initiatives may attend in deliberately distinctive ways to the particular neglect of victims felt in local communities. Thus, in 2020, Sead Djulić, a co-founder of the Mostar Youth Theatre, wrote and staged a play in memory of the victims of the Grabovica massacre of 1993, killed by members of the army he served in. *Uspavanka za Mladenku* (*A Lullaby for Mladenka*) was acted by Mostar teenagers from a diversity of backgrounds who had not experienced the war, and the performances—including one performance attended by families of the victims—reignited public discussion of the persistent lack of recognition and impunity for the murders.[47] This again is an example of the scope for activists to stake out their position or their identity in relation to local memories of violence, and against local political structures which have fostered forgetting. The performance was a reflection of the distinct fate of the Mostar region during the period in 1993 when combatant forces sought to divide Muslims and Catholics. There is a dimension here, beyond this, in which the implicated subjects involved in the performance staked out their position and identity on the basis of memories of coexistence from before the war. It was perhaps only possible to stage this dramatic reunion of older and younger Bosniak and Croat locals to the degree that youth from the city retain, as Monika Palmberger has described it,[48] an aspiration to preserve local relationships at the civic, human, and neighbourly levels—a desire not captured by the *Perspektiva* documentary on the experience of youth in Mostar.

Rothberg's notion of the implicated subject is more useful still in describing the dynamics of local peacebuilding work which embraces political actors as part of a cross-community socialisation process, rather than rejecting the violent, predatory political system outright. Activities of this nature are staged deliberately in communities across the country, including in the seamline between the two political entities in which violent ethnic cleansing had most prolonged and effective impact. Sometimes they reflect outside interest in and support for peacebuilding in a community, but such activities are also promoted by local figures. Every summer, for instance, Bosniak returnees from the area of the town of Rudo, near the border with Serbia, mark the deaths of family members killed by members of the Bosnian Serb army by laying flowers in the river there. In 2017, the mayor, Rato Rajak, was invited to speak at the

[47] Nikola Bačić (2020).

[48] These themes are explored further in the context of remembrance activities in Mostar by Palmberger (2016: e.g., 21).

event, although he had served in that army and clearly represented the 'other' side in the conflict. In his speech, Rajak was frank about the existence of different perspectives, emphasising that these did not characterise the relationships between Serbs and Bosniaks in the local area, which were personal and greatly prized.[49]

This kind of event contrasts starkly with the activism of CNA, and from the perspective of those peacebuilding movements which judge their primary task to be to unseat the political elite which perpetuates the conflicts of the 1990s, the speech by the mayor is of little evident significance. It is not evident that it should be dignified with the term 'peacebuilding', and perhaps his role in terms of 'remembrance' was perfunctory, and the mayor's political position in this objectivising perspective makes the event still more suspect. However, the survivors and their families in Rudo had sought the mayor out, and media reports make it evident that this was in some degree a meaningful act for both parties. In Rothberg's terms, both the Bosniak returnees and the mayor could measure the sacrifice they made to an identity based on the clash of victim and perpetrator, an identity which serves practical and wider political purposes in their context. Objectively, the encounter could be dismissed as a staged moment in the mayor's itinerary. The mayor did not set out the ground of his involvement in a common rejection of violent crimes committed by his side. On the contrary, that he underlined his involvement implied a movement between different perspectives on the past and a desire for personal relationship in the present. If this is not to be dismissed outright, a subjective tool such as Rothberg's is needed. By admitting a personal dimension that may develop in parallel with an acknowledgement of different judgements about the past, the invitation to the mayor, and his response, may be seen as unusually bold, rather than simply a formal performance reflecting perhaps mutual economic or political interests.

Examples of such relationships can be found in other locations in which returnees make a small and unequal minority, living alongside communities which include those who murdered their family members. The demands this places on attempts to combine local peacebuilding and remembrance work can be seen from the day of solidarity which joined the communities of Doboj South, Petrovo, and Usora, in 2018.[50] The events they staged together constitute one of the most deliberately inclusive instances of cross-communal remembrance to date. But some sensitivity is required in order to determine whether or not they were simply the heavily choreographed performances of the three community mayors, or a vehicle for the creation of new relational spaces in which mutual suffering could be acknowledged.

[49] Alen Bajramović (2017).
[50] PRO-Future (2018).

These three communities include residents from different nationalities divided during the war, divided now by the inter-entity line. The municipalities had been among the first thirty-two communities to join the Pro-Budućnost peacebuilding programme (funded by USAID and coordinated by Catholic Relief Services) in 2014. A day of joint remembrance was chosen by the local committee which coordinated among the municipalities as a way to give substance to their common adherence to the programme's Platform for Peace. The three mayors joined each other for a day in which they paid respect at different locations to the civilian victims on all sides. They were joined by the schoolchildren and other members of the three communities, with the mayors underlining that they intended their own acts to indicate to these members of their community above all their desire to live together in peace. In celebrating the committee of locals who had made this possible, the Pro-Budućnost programme singled out Slađana Lazarević with an award reflecting both the achievement that this event constituted, and also her resilience in promoting similar activities over time against local resistance. Ms Lazarević, in receiving her award, noted that this was one of the two events of which she was most proud.[51]

To discern what is performance and what authentic or effective peacebuilding requires close attention to perspectives that are limited or constrained by felt differences across the communities, and which are also potentially liberating insofar as they are multidirectional, describing a relational basis for shared futures defined by a demonstration of common purpose (and not by the common purpose alone). The challenges of peacebuilding at this local level can be intuited from the form it took. Participants were not presented with a forceful challenge to the cultures of nationalism, violence, and denial, but were instead directed not to take those political cultures as a basis for local coexistence. The mayors exhorted listeners to see that the victims on all sides were humans; that 'the victim and the criminal have neither religion nor nation'.[52] This is not a rejection of the political structures which create division nationally or locally. The premise for the event to take place was rather that participants joined as divided communities who seek peace. The divergent identities of the victims implicitly mattered, even as participants were exhorted not to draw distinctions. The participants were involved not as perpetrators and victims, but as implicated subjects, as Rothberg has described it, acknowledging a sense of responsibility through their participation, and being encouraged to focus on this responsibility as the leitmotif of the mayors' interventions. If our position is to judge whether the event was a formal affair, a choreographed show, this may be enough to unsettle any interest we might have in the outcome. Certainly the mayors were centred, or centred themselves, in the

[51] Bug (2020).
[52] *Buka* (2018).

formal proceedings which were presented to the attending children. Rothberg's relational approach may allow a quite different perspective on the presence of the schools, however: even granted that this entailed a formal demonstration that the offices of the mayors had the power to bring whole schools together, the presence of the children also meant the communities were creating a new space in which divisive politics were joined in a perspective to embrace a common future.

To entertain doubts about the motives of public leaders belongs to the territory for activists and scholars alike. Nevertheless, the experience of communities and generations coming together in such a politically sensitive context breaks with the patterns of political normality, and its value could survive a degree of scepticism. As Rothberg has indicated, the active involvement of individuals in acts of remembrance that break ground across divided and excluded communities can provide an experience which frames the future-facing dimension of the remembrance activity, quite separately from the exhortations and interests of the municipalities. Seen in this light, if there is a charge to be laid against such events that they are depoliticising situations of injustice, there is also the possibility that joint remembrance events can constitute a step towards creating a personal relationship and a political community which will take as a foundation stone the significance for community members of their community's victims.

Conclusions

In this essay, I have sought to foreground the conditions in which a combination of peacebuilding and memory work is chosen as a means of resistance to the continuing impact of divisive ethnonationalist politics in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The essay shows how competing approaches to peace and to the politics of memory address objective political and social obstacles in more and in less combative terms. There is a subjective dimension to each of these approaches, which this essay has addressed through Rothberg's treatment of implicated subjecthood and—with respect to the difficult involvement of younger generations in particular—multidirectional memory. Rothberg's toolkit frames subjective identity and relationships through a deliberately normative and activist lens, and we have sought here to distinguish ways in which it can also serve to cast light on the processes through which peace and memory activists in Bosnia-Herzegovina indicate that they are implicated, and not only that they should be.

I have presented an overview of common objectivising perspectives in the existing literature on peacebuilding and on the creation of a culture of memory in the country —notably represented here through the works of Nerzuk Ćurak, of Adnan Hasanbegović, and of the Centre for Nonviolent Action. We may ask where and when these activists use their implicated subjectivity, or their positionality, as part of their

otherwise objectivising activism. The combination of peacebuilding and memory activities are, for this set of critical observers, a necessary means for overcoming structures of violence, opposing them with a culture of memory and a culture of peace. These activists take their position in activities which contrast formal and informal commemoration. They oppose the politics of remembrance which centres violent actors and their post-war successors with their own journeys to anti-war activism, and with their validation of the experiences of a population ill served by elites and elite culture. This deliberately radical activist approach has been increasingly applied at a local level. In designing activities for this local context, the subjectivity of these activists becomes apparent in a new sense. At the local level, the project of humanising individuals and communities has a reality. These realities form a counter to ethnonationalist ideologies in which remembrance of wartime sacrifices highlights victims at a symbolic, abstract level. There is some space for marginal political activist movements to take centre stage in peacebuilding work at the local level, thanks to a degree of separation from the state-wide party political contest. At this local level, the CNA activists and their supportive networks have nevertheless engaged on the basis that the future of the country lies in a common set of values for citizens, not in the political recognition for diversity across the country's communities.

Those local activities which, by contrast, join peacebuilding and remembrance without a radical or an oppositional framing are more obvious candidates for Rothberg's subjective and relational approach insofar as this subjective, relational dimension is centred in their activism. For this strand of peace and memory activism, these local activities are first valued because it is possible locally to bring real people together, in a process of socialisation which transcends their different identities. The extent to which this peacebuilding process is deemed to be more important than the ongoing competition over divisive political narratives is implied, but it does not structure the activities as clearly as is the case for the critical peacebuilding movement. To the degree that this second form of local activity aims to embrace political actors, the approach taken does not rest on a contrast between formal and informal activity, between norms or cultures. This makes it more difficult to assess the motivation of these activities and their impact in objective terms. For this reason, it is these activities which are more challenging to assess primarily or solely in objective terms. Rothberg's reflections on the dynamics of memory and peacebuilding work across communities divided by conflict and by atrocity are especially useful in clarifying the subjective value attached to these activities, their relational value. This subjective sphere may be more difficult to evaluate where activities are performed or choreographed in order to encompass formalities and institutions, but the tools offered by Rothberg nevertheless allow a description to encompass relational elements of a local activity which indicate where it has transformative elements, realism, and/or local authenticity.

Rothberg's notions of multidirectional memory and subjective implication in acts of violence and of reparation are most clearly relevant to the stated objectives of this second form of peacebuilding and memory work. They may nevertheless also helpfully be applied to the former set of peacebuilding activities, which assume the basic challenge for peace activists is to confront a culture of violence in the public sphere. Critics of Rothberg have noted that this subjective conceptual framework is more reliable in its reflections on ideal situations and objectives than in describing pre-existing realities.[53] Here, we have explored instead the extent to which the two contesting approaches to the design of peacebuilding and memory work covered here both work with the importance of relational thinking, whether this starts with oppositional or with inclusive approaches. Both sets of activists use their subjective identity in opposing violent narratives about objective national realities. We may equally apply the same subjective and multidirectional criteria to both sets of activist projects insofar as they seek to engage a younger generation whose interests are distant from the political competition over remembrance as it has been experienced by the older generations. The extent to which the activities of both tendencies rely on locality and seek to involve a detached younger generation foregrounds how far the two approaches to peacebuilding and memory work are not solely determined by objective realities, but also rely on strategic choices about the open prospects for new relationships to develop that can withstand those realities. Rothberg's toolkit is a really useful resource for evaluating those choices.

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