

***Responsibility, Reconciliation, and Remembrance:***  
**Serbian Youth Perspectives in Dealing with the Past**

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## **Abstract:**

Dealing with the past is a process in which a society determines truthful facts of previous events, and with the support of civil society and its leaders, undergoes a transformation from a culture of conflict to one of peace, through reconciliation and depolarization<sup>1</sup>. Youth between the ages of 18-30 are the future of Serbia. They grew up in the midst of war, under a regime that greatly affected the economical, social, and political stability of the newly independent country. Because of these factors, their perspectives and opinions become critical in determining how this country is approaching topics of the past. This study highlights their opinions about governmental engagement, non-governmental organization's initiatives, and personal responsibility towards topics of the past, and whether or not they are effective in creating a culture of peace for Serbia's future.

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<sup>1</sup> Bleeker, Mò, and Jonathan Sisson, eds. *Dealing with the Past: Critical Issues, Lessons Learned, and Challenges for Future Swiss Policy*, Swiss Peace Foundation. Bern: Swiss Peace, 2005. 16 Nov. 2007  
<[www.swisspeace.ch/typo3/fileadmin/user\\_upload/pdf/KOFF/KOFF\\_DealingWithThePast.pdf](http://www.swisspeace.ch/typo3/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/KOFF/KOFF_DealingWithThePast.pdf)>.

**Map and Timeline of Research:**

Belgrade: November 14-25

Novi Sad: November 26

Belgrade: November 27-29

Small Town in Southern Serbia: November 29-30

Niš: November 30-31

Belgrade: November 31-December 11

The beige colored areas are the autonomous regions of Vojvodina (in the north) and Kosovo (in the south) and Montenegro is now an independent country.



## **Introduction:**

### *About the Researcher:*

Every time I step off a plane I am reminded, confusing and disjointed as always, that this world is bigger than I could ever conceive. I realize time after time that my perspective has limited scope, and that my experiences score low on the worldwide scale of occurrences. By happenstance or mere lining of the cosmos I was thrown in with the very complicated and meaty ingredients that make Balkan history and its current transformations. The truth is, Serbia was the last place I would ever think to find myself living. However, the more I learned, the less I understood, and the more intrigued I became. The more people I talked to, the longer I needed to listen.

I see myself as an activist—whether it is in the form of organizing events on campus, joining thousands in mass protest, or living in a different culture and trying to learn how to help without hurting. I see myself constantly growing and learning each day, trying to figure out how to positively contribute to the world around me. It isn't enough to complain about what is wrong, but to join others and do something about it. I come from a very liberal place in the United States, where it is okay to be an outrageous young female saying what is on my mind as loudly as I can.

Activism to me is working with it all. By this I mean working with what needs to happen, working with what has happened, and working with others around you—listening, understanding, and translating—about how to make it all coalesce into a soup everyone can eat. This connects to the process of dealing with the past in many ways. In Serbia, a country going through many transitions, there are people who are working with it all (i.e.: dealing with the past)

and there are people who are not interested in working with any of it. This is how the work connects to me.

There are activists everywhere. They might not call themselves so, but there are people everywhere who are trying to work with it all to make something better. What is better? It is quite relative. But the fight to bring people together, to create something positive<sup>2</sup>, is the fight of an activist. I came to Serbia feeling like I had a whole lot to learn from the youth in this country and I wanted to listen.

### ***About the Research:***

Although still transitioning in many ways, quite a bit has already changed in Serbia. In 2000, when the Milošević regime ended and groups like OTPOR<sup>3</sup> and Women in Black<sup>4</sup> rejoiced in the streets with the legitimate hope for another Serbia, little was really known of what would come in the near future. Young children and teenagers, those who grew up in Serbia without a peaceful nation to rely on, became very central to my interest in this country. Some would grow up to be students at the universities, activists in the big city, or hard working citizens. Their decisions to become academics, organizers, workers, etc, significantly reflects their experiences growing up during the 1990s, a time of myths<sup>5</sup>, a time of war, and a time of

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<sup>2</sup> I recognize that to make something positive is completely subjective. People sometimes think they are doing something for the greater common good but sometimes it is not always so. This is what makes the activist world so confusing, disjointed, difficult, and beautiful

<sup>3</sup> OTPOR means resistance in the Serbian language and was a student-formed oppositional force against the Milošević regime in the late 1990's into the early 2000's.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.womeninblack.net/>, an international organization which started in Israel in 1988. They stand in silent protest against war, rape as a tool for war, ethnic cleansing, and human rights abuses. Women in Black Belgrade have stood in silence since the wars began in 1991.

<sup>5</sup> When I write about nationalism and myth making among the Serbian people it is based on the following: I speculate that rising nationalism, otherizing, and wars fought over land and antiquity, as well as the constant state of self-victimization that Serbs have lived under for quite some time can be explained by various mythological

hatred. Although the wars did not physically touch Serbian land (not including the NATO bombings in Serbia in 1999), the media, the stories of refugees and immigrants, the failing economy, and the voices of resistance, illustrated the time as one of confusion, desperation, and sadness.

Although the country is slowly but surely pulling itself back up on its feet economically, the not-too-distant past is still very obvious in the city's character. The country of Yugoslavia dismembered sixteen years ago, the war in Bosnia ended twelve years ago, the NATO bombings ceased eight years ago, and Zoran Djindjic was assassinated only four years ago<sup>6</sup>. During these times, it was hard for Serbs to know what was really occurring in their own country, let alone the outside world<sup>7</sup>. I was unsure of what I would find in this research, but I knew it was likely that I would be confused by the variety of thoughts and perceptions among the different youth living throughout Serbia.

This brings me to the questions I began to ask myself while traveling around the Balkans in the fall 2007: how are Serbian youth growing up during a time of such discomfort and

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theories. The *antemurale* myth appears when a group of people believe themselves to be incomparable to other groups. By creating this boundary, this mythical creation that separates these people from one another because of gross magnification of differences, groups of people who might share certain characteristics no longer do in the eyes of the superiors (I.e: Croats, Serbs, and Bosniaks). Along the same vein, the *sui generis* myth has differences emphasized based on blood lines. The myth of *martyrdom* places the group as the constant victim, who, in the end, is the superior to those who have conquered. This quickly can change into a preserved identity among a group. With this in mind, in order to conquer land, a myth of *antiquitas* is formed so as to easily justify reasons for war over land. I think that these mythological theories could be applied to Serbian history, especially that of martyrdom and *antemurale*. (Kolsto, Pal. "Introduction: Assessing the Role of Historical Myths in Modern Society". Myths and Boundaries in South-Eastern Europe. 1-34.)

<sup>6</sup> The reformist Prime Minister of Serbia who was elected after the fall of the Milošević regime in October 2000. Djindjic pro-reform and pro-Western and gave hope to build a new Serbia. He was shot outside of government offices in Belgrade in March 2003 (BBC News, March 2003).

<sup>7</sup> During interviews, there was a lot of conversation about media propaganda during wartime. Many people, especially if they grew up in rural Serbia, found themselves having to completely relearn what happened when enrolling into Universities, finding that they learned things in a very nationalistic and manipulative way, from the one-sided television news stations, etc.

instability? How are they dealing with Serbia's past and what do they think of how their country deals with their history? How do these opinions reflect their environments growing up? Do youth in Serbia feel that they are personally responsible for dealing with the past? These questions inspired me enough to talk to the youth in Serbia, a place that, during one chunk of time (1990s), the world watched with a very critical lens. Serbia itself is still recovering from massive economic hardships, enduring a President who initiated war and manipulated the minds of people, as well as years of unstable transition from a former republic of the late Yugoslavia to the independent country of Serbia. The youth are Serbia's hope for a better future.

There is a lot of information devoted to youth in Serbia, although most is not directed towards youth perspective. Most of the written sources I came across had to do with education in rural Serbia, the effects of clericalization in the school system, the resistance of OTPOR, literature written by local NGOs (like the Youth Initiative for Human Rights), nationalism in Serbia, public perceptions of NGOs (not targeted towards youth), and anti-war activism in Serbia during the 1990s. This is all very important to the greater understanding of Serbian history and recent transformation; however, these sources were not providing extra insight into the perceptions of youth today.

Some Serbs have the unique mindset that illustrates their country as a superior nation, the Serbian people as being oppressed scapegoats for centuries, and the land (including Kosovo) to be unique to the Serbian people and history. The main source of theory I use in this paper is based off of Pal Kolsto's book, *Myths and Boundaries in South-Eastern Europe*, where he defines different myths that have been created, which presumably helped to construct this mindset I saw so often throughout my research. This mindset heavily influences how people



remember the past, and how people think of Serbia as a country and a people. Keeping this in mind, it becomes important to deconstruct where people's views are cited from and how that affects their current status (ie: student, activist, etc).

There is one piece written, however, that is very important and guiding my own research. Maryanne Yerkes' "Facing the Violent Past: Discussions with Serbian Youth"<sup>8</sup> was researched and written between the years 2001-2002, as Yerkes interviewed 78 youths in Serbia (youth and Serbian elite)- but her findings were extracted only from research in Belgrade because of the unsuitable amount of information that was available to compare the rural youth to urban youth. She defines the "facing process" as one that "refers to initiatives purportedly aimed at shedding light on crimes committed during the recent Balkan wars and on events that led up to the wars. In addition to shedding light, these processes may also seek accountability for what happened and acknowledgment from the wider society" (4). She focused mainly on youth perspectives in Belgrade, describing seven variables as being the most important and influential aspects of how they confront the dealing process<sup>9</sup>.

The biggest difference between my research and Yerkes' is that I have included voices of youth living outside of Belgrade. Leaving Belgrade was very important to me, and it became

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<sup>8</sup> Yerkes, Maryanne. "Facing the Violent Past: Discussions with Serbia's Youth". *Nationalities Papers*. Vol 32, No 4. December 2004. pp 921-938.

<sup>9</sup> Contextual factors, such as Serbia's post-war environment and the phenomenon of civil society building; the extent to which people believe the facing process is benefiting them, *f.e.g.*. For whom is the process or initiative designed? How does it help them? Is it perceived as being deleterious to them in any way?); The extent to which people feel involved in the process, *f.e.g.*. Is the process participatory? Do people feel they have a voice? Does the method used for facing the past help to engage them in the process?); Whether or not people perceive the process as being indigenous; Degree of trust people have in the leaders of the initiatives. (How do they view their previous activities? Are they viewed as doing positive things for the public?); Personal and group psychological factors connected to interviewees' views on facing the past, *f.e.g.*. Do people feel that their identities are being threatened? Do they have personal interests that conflict with the facing process?); Extent to which facing processes are supported by the media and those in power (926).

increasingly so after Belgradians themselves continued to urge me to go out and explore what they described as “the Real Serbia 10.” Although the amount of people I have interviewed is not substantial, as well as the time spent in the country (in my opinion it is never enough), it provides a glimpse into the distinctions that can be found between growing up in rural Serbia vs. urban Serbia, and how living in rural Serbia today has an impact on how people have learned about the country they live in.

### **Methodology:**

The research was conducted from November 14-December 3, 2007 and includes two interviews from students in Belgrade from mid-October. I lived in Belgrade for the entirety of the research but also visited and interviewed in the cities and towns of Novi Sad, Niš, and a small town in southeastern Serbia<sup>11</sup>, shown in the map on the previous page. I focused my interviews on youth between the ages of 18-30<sup>12</sup>, with the hope that this age range would also place their experiences at different ends of the memory spectrum (between not remembering/not experiencing much but still being quite effected by their surroundings as children, and remembering the wars vividly while at the same time understanding the life that as within the time of Yugoslav peace and prosperity<sup>13</sup>). All of the people I interviewed are either enrolled in a

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<sup>10</sup> “Real Serbia”, as I perceived it, was the life Serbian people live outside of the big Capital city of Belgrade and the more progressive autonomous region of Vojvodina, where Novi Sad is. This was enough to motivate me to take a trip down to Niš and another small town in the southeastern part of Serbia to talk to more young people and see what I would find there. I also heard that they have really great food there which soon became the second motivating factor.

<sup>11</sup> Town unnamed to establish anonymity

<sup>12</sup> See appendix A

<sup>13</sup> This was shortly affirmed after attending a dormitory party of one of the young men I interviewed. He showed me a red hammer. He put the red hammer in front of my face and showed that it was covered with a Band-Aid. He continued to explain to me how, while growing up (the first four years of his primary education) he was bred as a

University, have already graduated from the University, are activists<sup>14</sup>, or exist within a combination of these variables.

I wanted to speak with young people who had ranges of experience in the 1990s, people who came from different towns and cities of ex-Yugoslavia, and from diverse ethnic backgrounds. I anticipated that this would give me a well-rounded view of how and why this time is remembered differently by youth, why youth do or do not want to reconcile and deal with the past, and whether or not they envision their country as dealing with this time in an effective and adequate way. Activists in the non-governmental sector, I assumed, would have specific opinions on the theme of reconciliation and dealing with the past relative to their work, especially if their organization deals directly with this topic. Youth who are less involved with the activist scene in Belgrade, Niš, and Novi Sad might have opposing views. I also wanted to get a better understanding of the exact role NGOs play in civil society and determine if they are effective in their missions devoted towards topics of the past through the eyes of the participating and non-participating youth.

The organizations I spoke with were: Youth Initiative for Human Rights in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš; Women in Black in Belgrade; 1389 in Belgrade, and Women for Peace<sup>15</sup>.

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proud pioneer and that he should love Tito, Yugoslavia, and all the ideals of that time (ie: brotherhood and unity). He said that the hammer was used if you didn't believe, but that it wouldn't hurt you because there was a Band-Aid on the end. This is an example of youth remembering Yugoslavia and what it meant to live in a socialist country, brotherhood and unity, and Tito.

<sup>14</sup> I have decided to call people "activists" if they identified themselves that way, or if their main job was to work at an NGO.

<sup>15</sup> I chose these organizations for a few reasons. They all focus at least a portion of their work on topics of the past, youth are very actively involved in the processes, they are involved in legal action but also social action (taking it to the streets), and they were the ones to get back in touch with me. I wanted to interview a youth from the Humanitarian Law Center but I was unable to, which is the main organization in Serbia that has been working towards reconciliation of the past through an objective collection of data from the wars in collaboration with NGOs from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. See Appendix B for more information about the NGOs.

The students I spoke to were enrolled in the faculties of Law, Political Science, English language, English Literature, Communication and Media, and Film. One grew up in a Serb town in Bosnia-Herzegovina, one in a town in the Slavonia region of Croatia<sup>16</sup>, four grew up in small towns around central Serbia, six grew up in Belgrade, two grew up in Niš, two grew up in Novi Sad, and two grew up in small towns in the autonomous region of Vojvodina<sup>17</sup>. The teenagers from the meeting in the small town in southeastern Serbia all grew up in that town.

The interviews consisted of semi-structured dialogues, some of which were one-on-one, and some of which were focus groups, as well as informal conversations (with the understanding that the information would be used in the research I was doing). The focus groups occurred while meeting with the NGOs and gave a more holistic view into the lives of activists from an organization. It also provided insight into how youth within the organization are presenting their perspectives of dealing with the past to the public audience. This in comparison with student's perspectives on how NGOs are or are not contributing to Serbian society was very engaging. It was all coming from the mouths of the youth, but what was coming out was sometimes very different from person to person.

As a young activist from the United States, I was attracted to the more liberal, extreme, and passionate organizations like the Women in Black and the Youth Initiative. But realizing my place within this identity, I understood that things here are perceived and handled vastly different than where I am from. As a woman (and proud feminist), I found myself wanting to urge other young women who are active to continue being strong, public, female figures. These two lenses I

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<sup>16</sup> The eastern part of Croatia that was greatly effected by the wars in the 1990s (i.e. the town of Vukovar, right on the boarder of Serbia)

<sup>17</sup> The autonomous region found in the North, bordering Hungary

had on as a researcher needed to be set aside for a while, as it was my goal to get a better understanding of how Serbian youth perceive what is happening, not what I think is the correct way of perceiving it all.

I also spent some of my free time volunteering and accompanying people working and organizing with Women in Black. The decision to help out at the Women in Black office was not one to further my own research; rather it was to feed the feminist and activist identities I hold close to my heart<sup>18</sup>. It gave me space to be Erica in all my forms—without feeling scared that I would say the wrong thing, seem too radical, too “western” in my ideas, and too pissed off at the world around me. Often times I found myself interacting with Serbs, mainly men, with the intention to open their seemingly closed minds to realities of the world outside of Serbia. To have a space to openly share these thoughts, complaints, and questions, was liberating and allowed me to stay a healthy researcher for the entirety of my time in Serbia.

### **Findings:**

Yerkes stresses in her paper that the “clients of transnational justice” are the local people. Along the same vein, the young people, a social demographic that has changed quite a bit since socialist Yugoslavia<sup>19</sup>, are hidden within the news coverage of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), European Union integration, and most notably the political and social scenes surrounding Kosovo<sup>20</sup>. A significant part of the interviews were

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<sup>18</sup> Or, to be perfectly clear, to save my sanity and give me something that was separate from this research for me to focus part of my day on.

<sup>19</sup> During socialist Yugoslavia, youth were among one of the most important and focused on demographics in society

<sup>20</sup> the autonomous region in Southern Serbia that is on the verge of independence

devoted towards exploring how the participants remember and recount the past—how the media is influencing them, why and when they did or did not start to question things, and how all of these factors reflect where they grew up. After a bit of background was gathered, I began asking the participants more specific questions about governmental and non-governmental action towards dealing with the past, and then asked them about the importance of dealing with the past, and whether or not they think that they are personally responsible to deal with the past as Serbian citizens. If nothing else, I wanted to provide them a space to think about these issues in the broader context of Serbian society<sup>21</sup>.

Dealing with the past is a process in which a society determines truthful facts of previous events, and with the support of civil society and its leaders, undergoes a transformation from a culture of conflict to one of peace, through the processes of reconciliation and depolarization<sup>22</sup>. In the following pages, I hope to clearly define the differing perceptions among Serbian youth towards governmental engagement, non-governmental organization's initiatives, and personal responsibility towards topics of the past, and whether or not they are effective in creating a culture of peace for Serbia's future.

***Governmental Action (or Inaction):***

Since the wars, a few things have been initiated by the government in order to deal with what has happened in the 1990s. The Serbian Government cooperates with the ICTY, they have set up a War Crimes Court in Serbia, and also briefly set up Truth Commissions to determine facts about Serbia's role in the 1990s wars. However, all of the interviewees agreed that there is

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<sup>21</sup> See appendix C

<sup>22</sup> Bleeker and Sisson

a lack of Government initiative to tackle the issues of the past, and topics which concern the majority of Serbian society (i.e.: education, health, employment). Distrust in the current regime, President Boris Tadić and Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica, as well as an overwhelming focus on the case of Kosovo, has caused government involvement in issues of the past to cease almost completely. The main themes that came out of discussions about the government, as far as it's involvement in the issues of the past, cooperation with the ICTY, or formal public apologies were as following: that the cooperation with the ICTY was to save face in the international community (because they have to formally cooperate or else they will be refused the track to European Union status), that formal apologies were always relative to something that had happened to the Serbs in the past, and that Governmental manipulation in the 1990s and now is creating a space to run away from issues of the past.

I think what happened in Serbia with how the government cooperated with the Hague, it was not in terms of not dealing with the past but it terms of 'we have to do this in order to be in the EU, or we have to do this in order to not have sanctions, or we have to do this in order to have economical support from another country'. It is always 'poor victim Serbia always has to deal with all these obligations that international community is asking for'<sup>23</sup>.

Many young people who I talked to agreed with this interviewee, a 27-year old activist in Belgrade. The government is not seen by the youth as initiating projects concerning the past, nor as cooperating with current activities, in an altruistic way. In fact, the Serbian government creates an atmosphere of ignorance among its citizens, as a mechanism to avoid a true, objective recount of what happened during the wars and what role Serbia played during that time.

The government isn't doing anything. The only thing that is being conducted by the government is things directly being asked by the International Community or the

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<sup>23</sup> Interview # 8 by the author

ICTY authority. In the majority of cases these things are being calculated through money. If we extradite Milošević we will get money to improve our position. Even the acceptance of the European Union is being promoted by politicians by money. There are no talks about values or what is the bottom line of changing the values or the system of all the values in the country and why it is necessary to change the way of thinking. It has also been the policy of the government in facing the past<sup>24</sup>.

The two things the Serbian government is most concerned with are the case of Kosovo and Serbian integration into the European Union. Because of these major concerns, governmental involvement and interest in anything else (i.e.: issues concerning the past) are less than adequate. When asking the Youth Initiative in Novi Sad how their cooperation with the local or national government was, they laughed. They also laughed when I mentioned the truth commissions that existed early on in the new millennium<sup>25</sup>. Until politicians are willing to tackle the past, one political science student was explaining to me, this issue will not be taken seriously.

We never had this serious saying to people ‘yes, in the name of the ethnicity and religion, Serbian army killed so many people’. Because it is always some kind of relativisation. People never dealt with it responsibly. We are talking about human rights, human lives, about another person. Not about some Croatian. I know when I go to Croatia they also have this nationalism, it isn’t Serbia exclusively. From this position of government you didn’t have clear messages saying to young people that it is not okay<sup>26</sup>.

A lot of the interviewees focused on the manipulative mechanisms found within the media that allow people in rural and even urban Serbia to believe in what the current regime wants them to believe in. One of the interviewees grew up in a mountain village where there

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<sup>24</sup> Interview # 9 by the author

<sup>25</sup> When asking about the truth commissions Serbia had in the early part of the new millennium, the activists from the Youth Initiative in Novi Sad responded with: “Oh no please. Even then, that wasn’t the real thing. If it was going to be a national initiative, then they should include all nationalities, but it was only Serbia, and those Serbians were nationalists. It was a way for Koštunica to say “I am doing that” and then they made a group of people who don’t agree with each other and they have a mandate but not enough authorities to do anything for real. And nobody did anything about that. Only NGOs and NGOs are perceived as demons or great enemies of Serbian society”.

<sup>26</sup> Interview #8 by the author



were about 12 inhabitants. After 6 years, he moved to small town in central Serbia where the only news coverage was Radio Television Serbia (RTS), the government run media station. He confessed that he believed what the TV was saying. “I was in support of what the news was saying. But there was nothing else; the only thing you could hear was that. So when I came to Belgrade from High School I totally thought that everyone was against us and people were really doing some bad stuff<sup>27</sup>”. This interviewee is finishing up at the University of Belgrade’s political science faculty. Since arriving to Belgrade, as he said, he began questioning, learning more, seeking out the truth about the past. The political science faculty has given him the tools and the urge to find the truth—through conversations, debates, dialogues—about what has happened in the Balkans during the 1990s. This was not a rare thing for me to hear. Among the interviewees who were presently studying at a University, most of them mentioned the important to re-learn and find the truth about what happened. The main tool is the internet, a way to seek out more objective and well-rounded perspectives of what happened in the Balkans during the 1990s. But when you are a young teenager or child growing up in rural Serbia, your options are limited.

During my childhood, Serbia was systematically, and when I say systematically I mean they knew what they were doing, they were changing school books, trying to learn how someone is trying to ruin this country so the press and free society and the initiative they were being systematically ruined. And every time the citizens tried to do something, go on the street, the newspapers and journalists were killed... and especially in the country there was no other television in the ‘90s only RTS, so what they say, let’s say 70% of people in the country don’t have any other channel than RTS. And news during this time, it was pure brain manipulation<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Interview #4 by the author

<sup>28</sup> Interview #4 by the author

Many people still follow what the regime is saying because they still do not have other options. Social infrastructure is not what it should be, schools are limited, unemployment is high, and the economy is still not functioning at its full potential. When the government do cooperate with institutions created to deal with the past, mainly the ICTY, it isn't viewed as something honest.

### ICTY:

Among visions of how the government is or is not dealing with the past, the question of the quality of the Hague/ICTY came up in almost every interview. Opinions ranged from seeing The Hague as a necessary evil, a great idea with many faults, and an institution completely against the Serbian people. "I think it is a necessary evil. There must be some justice for the people and what they did in the '90s and at the time when this need came into existence there was no local court that could deal with it<sup>29</sup>." The same argument, of local courts not being sufficient enough, was explained in a few conversations I had with people. However, people were mostly dissatisfied with the actions of the ICTY, and how it was unequally imprisoning Serbs over Croats, Bosniaks, and Muslims. The representative I spoke to from the group '1389' explained to me how the ICTY is simply hurting people rather than helping the situation, and that international opinion about what happened in this region is not the way to do this process.

It is not effective or helping people. It is hurting Balkan people. Everyone has heroes and for Serbs I don't see anything better. When Croatia's hero is in prison only hate grows by Croatia against the Serbs because their hero is in prison. Putting Milošević in The Hague was a big mistake. We must have tribunals in Serbia because Serb people need to be the judges, and Croatian judges for the Croatian regime. [...] All Serbs are against The Hague because 90% of people in the prison are Serbs<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Interview #5 by the author

<sup>30</sup> Interview #3 by the author

Then there is the argument that The Hague has lasted too long, has changed its pace since it's creation, and is taking too long.

Before I thought it was a great idea, theoretically a super idea. You have an independent institution that will objectively talk about everything that happened and it will be broadcasted on TV and people can see it and learn what went on. It was a super idea [...] I am sorry that Milošević and Tudjman died before, I think that was actually shit, I have to use that word. I was hoping that publicly the whole society would hear actually that these guys were sentenced for this long for this, this, and this and that would be a really great message, a big message, for victims, for people here. I think that it also wasn't according to The Hague's plans that these guys would actually die before they managed to go through the process. So I guess after that this government is like running to find Mladić and Karadzic, and when Carla Del Ponte is here we are having problems with going from one part of the city<sup>31</sup>. It's trivial. It's like, Oh the city is crowded maybe Carla is here. It wasn't like it was in the beginning, it has changed I think. And it is lasting too long. But I think it should continue to exist, to finish what they were after<sup>32</sup>.

None of the interviewees seemed to be too enthusiastic about the role of The Hague in present-day Serbia, although positive attributes to its existence were stressed. Serbia's present infrastructural system (at this time I am speaking towards the judicial system) is insufficient to deal with these charges internally.

The ICTY was created to bring an objective view to the charges set against all parties involved in the 1990s wars. Although it is heavily criticized within Serbia, the choices of how to do it differently cannot really exist in Serbia's current condition. The fact that the Government in Serbia today is more or less uninterested in educating Serbian citizens in an objective and clear

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<sup>31</sup> Radovan Karadžić was the leader of the Bosnian Serbs and former President of the Bosnian Serbian Republic, as well as the founder and president of the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) of what was then the Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He is currently being sought after by The Hague for his role in ethnically cleansing in Bosnia in 1995. Ratko Mladić, since 1992, has been the commander of the army of Bosnia Serb administration. He is currently being sought after by The Hague for the same charges (detailed information on the charges can be found at <http://www.un.org/icty/indictment/english/kar-ii950724e.htm>). Carla Del Ponte has been the Prosecutor of the ICTY since 1999 (<http://www.un.org/icty/officials/delponte-e.htm>).

<sup>32</sup> Interview # 8 by the author

way, and is just going through the necessary steps in order to gain EU status, money, or international praise for dealing with the past, shows that until this issue is tackled politically, people will continue to live in denial and ignorance.

*Non-governmental organizations:*

The Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) scene in Serbia is hard to understand as an outsider activist from the United States. The mission of each organization that I worked with is different, but they all have some element devoted to issues of the past. Women in Black has been around since the 1990s, and has been fighting for many things; one in particular is confronting the past. During the war, the Women in Black were on the streets showing their anti-war opinions. The Humanitarian Law Center is more legally focused, and has been working with other organizations throughout the Balkans to collect an objective and quantitative report of the killings and events which occurred in the region during the 1990s. 1389 is an organization that desires to “wake up the national minds of youth<sup>33</sup>.” Their activities consist of a lot of public demonstrations. They put out a lot of posters, stickers, and flyers with certain ideas targeted towards Kosovo and the ICTY. Their stance was drastically different than the other organizations I worked with, which was a very important perspective to gain since a large amount of Serbian society shares the same ideals as this group.

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<sup>33</sup> 1389 was the main opposition voice among the activist organizations I worked with. I got the representative’s number from my advisor who knew someone with the contacts. The representative was unsure of why I wanted to talk about his work with 1389, questioning who else I was working with, what it would be used for, etc. Once I told him what I was interested in, we had a great 2 hour conversation (which was broken up into Serbian, English, and German, which made for quite the interesting interview transcription) about 1389 and his views towards dealing with the past. Although I only got to speak with one person from this ideological background, I was very happy I was able to do it. In the future I would definitely want to talk to more people from this stance—possibly groups like Obraz or religiously affiliated organizations.

Some NGOs criticize one another, some are networking together. But there is also heavy criticism from students who I talked to about the role of NGOs in Serbian society, their intentions, and their effectiveness. Yerkes also found a strong amount of criticism of NGOs in Serbia from the people she interviewed. Although the “facing process” is something that can easily be said to be helpful for all of society, people need to believe that as well (929).

I gained insight from the people from within the organizations, as well as students from outside of the organizations. Together, I found the following themes: that youth see NGOs as doing the job the government refuses to do, that NGOs are just provoking society rather than invoking them in their cause, that NGOs are too westernized and anti-Serbia, that NGOs are in it for the money, that NGOs are effective for those within the organization but aren’t necessarily changing citizen’s minds, and that NGOs are forcing people to think about issues that have been put off too long. I first want to discuss the outsider’s perspectives of NGOs (student non-activists) and afterwards I will discuss the insider’s perspectives (activists within the organizations).

#### The Non-Activist’s Perspective:

Although I didn’t speak to students who were completely isolated from activist communities in Serbia, I did speak to people who were less active and unaware of the inner workings of the NGOs I met with. Two interviewees described a certain amount of corruption among the NGO sector, condemning specific organizations and praising others. They expressed their thoughts about the process the groups go through in order to get money and how it does not

always go to the cause<sup>34</sup>. They also mentioned that the issues some NGOs tend to target (i.e.: dealing with the past, dialogue projects with reconciliation and peace building, inter-cultural experiences in the region, etc) are “hot topics” which will bring money into the organization. More than this, NGOs that work on opposite sides of the ideological scale are more similar than they think.

I agree with the Women in Black, what they stand for, but they became an ideology, and I disagree with that. But the Youth Initiative, and their structure, is an example of something I disagree with. They are abusing the values that the Women in Black stand for. They have the monopoly on the ‘dialogue projects’. [...] It is really exclusive. There is no option for the dialogue. This is the perfect example. The City Initiative, which is the big NGO that is in the head of the board of all the NGOs, they say there is no democracy for the enemies of the democracies. And everyone agrees that there is no place for the others. That is when I say thank you but no thank you. All criticalness is lost. It vanishes<sup>35</sup>.

Monopolizing certain topics, according to this interviewee, makes it hard for other organizations to take part in the same issues. This creates a vacuum of money from international donors to one or two organizations in the area, pushing out possibilities for more networking, ideas, and participation. Big NGOs and their monopolization of issues have suddenly become popular.

Activism has “become fashionable”, another interviewee said to me, cementing this idea that exists among at least some youth in Serbia. During the ‘90s, she explained, groups like Women in Black were effective because they were the only source of opposition during that time. Their struggle was dangerous and risky for the times, which created a group of dedicated individuals who really cared. Now, the times are not the same, and the organizations working are

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<sup>34</sup> It trickles-down. At the top of the hierarchy all the money starts, and by the time it reaches the bottom, where the money was intended for, most of it has seeped into the margins of the organization

<sup>35</sup> Interview #5 by author

not in it for the same reasons<sup>36</sup>. The reason some organizations are around, from what I gathered, was to get money on the fashionable issues, monopolize them, and pat their own backs.

Sometimes people do it to travel, sometimes people do it to put food in their stomachs. “It is more of the matter of claiming your space than doing what you’re supposed to. Many people see NGOs are a good way to travel and eat. I don’t judge them, and I see that as a good way from students from a country go to a seminar to get good food, and that is a good way to do it<sup>37</sup>.”

The representative from 1389 explained the activism of Women in Black and the Youth Initiative (these two in particular), as invoking divisions within the community, creating problems that do not exist, and sticking themselves in the past rather than looking ahead to the future. “They are making differences. [For instance,] you are Muslim and I am Serb and we have a fight, not because of our religions, but we have a problem between us, like if my neighbor took my woman or crashed my car. The Women in Black will come and will say that wasn’t a neighborhood fight but that was a fight between nations, religions, and that the Muslims are not safe here. Everyone knows that it isn’t true, and that they are making the difference bigger<sup>38</sup>.”

Although Women in Black were quite effective during the 1990s as the one of the only sources of opposition, I also gathered that they are not so effective today with their missions to get people thinking and dealing about the past. Students from the political science faculty, who were on the younger side of the age range I was working with, described organizations like Women in Black and the Youth Initiative. “They are trying to directly say everything and with that you create a huge group that hates you. Even I who agrees with them, I get irritated too. They make

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<sup>36</sup> Interview #2 by author

<sup>37</sup> Interview #5 by author

<sup>38</sup> Interview #3 by author

enemies and victims, they insist on the things Serbs have done wrong and it just provokes people. They say things that are very hard for normal people to understand. They make things very negative<sup>39</sup>.”

By holding Serbian society personally responsible for dealing with their country’s history, organizations like Women in Black and the Youth Initiative have been condemned as anti-Serb and against their own people. Maja Korac writes, “to be a Serb, to live in Serbia nowadays, and not to be nationally obsessed, means to be accused of betraying your nation, and labeled as a 'bad' Serb<sup>40</sup>”. This is something that many activists, specifically the Women in Black, have had to deal with when pushing issues of the past upon society.

One of the students explained how one day she was walking down the pedestrian street in the old town of Belgrade, and it was sunny out and she felt good. When she got to *Trg Republike*<sup>41</sup>, she saw the Women in Black protesting on the street, wearing all black, in silence, with signs and candles. It took her good day and made it negative, and she commented on how it wasn’t the appropriate way to send the message. This shows, like Yerkes found, a good amount of criticism focuses on NGOs being too westernized in a place that is not ready for that kind of approach.

This brings me to the next question of effectiveness of the NGOs in their projects, activities, and events devoted to themes of the past. One of the young men I interviewed, who has done work with Group 484, Bosperous International, and summer camps devoted to inter-

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<sup>39</sup> Interview # 6 by author

<sup>40</sup> Korac, Maja. "Serbian Nationalism: Nationalism of My Own People." *Feminist Review* 45 (1993): 108-112. 20 Nov. 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Republic Square - the main square in Belgrade



cultural experiences among children in the Balkans, commented on the personal influence that these organizations play on individual's lives.

It provokes people, but it also gives a certain hope for the other people who happen to be on the street. It keeps the flame there until somebody from the political elite decides to tackle this issue more seriously. So this raises important stuff for the mental health of the nation. That is how it is effective. It isn't effective in the sense that more and more people agree with it. That doesn't change much. It is more active in the sense in that that aspect of society exists and maybe one day it will go from the margins to the mainstream. And its efficiency will only become more meaningful over time [...] the thing is you can't deny the influence it has on the personal level<sup>42</sup>.

So although it might provoke non-activists (or activists from opposing ideological stances, such as 1389) in Serbia, those within it are given a community that is safe and comfortable, a place where their views are shared by others.

#### The Activist's Perspective:

So what pushed these young people to the activist scene? This was a question which I asked all the people who were involved in the NGOs I visited and the general census was that it all began to surface in college. When most of the interviewees were in high school, near the end of the 1990's, they began first becoming active locally. Some were involved in OTPOR; some were involved in nothing at all. Depending on where in Serbia they were coming from to Belgrade or to Novi Sad or Niš, depended on how much of a shock they were in for when taking classes at the University.

The arguments made from people working within the NGOs that deal with topics of the past, all of the criticisms I was hearing from the outside perspective were being addressed,

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<sup>42</sup> Interview #5 by the author

sometimes without me even prompting them to address them. While at the apartment of an activist working in the Niš office of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, I became aware of the other side of coin of this “inappropriate” activism that NGOs such as Women and Black and the YIHR practice. Although most people will compare these NGO’s tactics with that of the Western World<sup>43</sup>, the young activists I spoke to here have another vision. They explained to me how dealing with the past needs to start right away, and that if people wait too long, it will soon be ignored and be too late, just as it was from the Second World War. Fifty years later war broke out. The interviewees explained to me that without an adequate system of objective information, existing in history books and in workshops, things that would be distributed to everyone and anyone with citizenship in the region, another war could possibly break out in fifty years. Although their tactics might seem too harsh or in your face, it is the only way to really speak the truth. If the government will not direct their attention to these issues, somebody has to. And although they might seem radical, they are just trying to show something the government has been covering up, ignoring, and running away from for years<sup>44</sup>.

The representative of the Youth Initiative in Belgrade commends the work of his fellow activists.

These NGOs are the core people in Serbia who are brave and courageous and who committed their lives to the long distance effective work. And I think that without the Humanitarian Law Center, most of the data, the facts about the war crimes and

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<sup>43</sup> This was a very interesting aspect of the research. I was mostly drawn to the Women in Black street action tactics, brutal honesty, and very strong statements because it reminded me of a lot of the activism I am a part of at home. While talking to people more or less uninvolved in activism, it just doesn’t make sense to people here. Whereas I am used to these blatant and usually not-so-nice demonstrations, people here seem to be reluctant to even consider its presence. Since they are very similar to demonstrations in the US, some people have the idea those NGOs like Women in Black or the YIHR are hired to disintegrate the Serbian society, as in, the people were hired by Westerners to crush the independent nation of Serbia. This was all very intriguing for me to hear and see, as it made me realize that tactics don’t work the same way everywhere!

<sup>44</sup> Interview #22 by the author

the last 15 years wouldn't be stored as it is now. The role of Women in Black is very important for the promotion of women's right, promotion of facing the past, and establishing a mechanism for transitional justice<sup>45</sup>.

So within the activist circles, changes are being seen. Whether or not society is changing along with these organizations is questionable, although from inside, things are starting to work. The Novi Sad Youth Initiative was explaining to me one of their street actions called "Labyrinth" to show how they gauge the awareness of people in Novi Sad.

You come to a certain section and you are given a question, and if you answer it right you go to one section and if you answer it wrong you are in a dead end. One question was 'should Mladić go to Hague?', and a lot of people ended up in the dead end, maybe because they don't know. And we talked to them and asked why they think that and they answered that they don't know. They think he is a national hero and we tell him that he killed a lot of people. Who do you call someone who has killed one person? It's a killer. So we have this kind of dialogue<sup>46</sup>.

Then there is the activists' view of one ideological realm of activism compared to the other. The representative from the group 1389 compared his organization to those of the Women in Black and the Youth Initiative. Here I could see a big chasm between activists groups in Serbia, and the criticism found even within the inner-circle.

We have two sides in Serbia. One side is patriot and the other side is antinational. Like other groups like Women in Black or the Youth Initiative but the biggest difference between us, Obraz and other patriotic groups and the Youth initiative is that we have a big support of the people and no money. And The Youth Initiative, they have no support of the people but they have a very, very big budget, the biggest from all other movements of Serbs. Because we are doing from people to people, our fight is a fight for these people<sup>47</sup>.

Even from within, young activists feel differently about the NGO scene within Serbia. When it comes down to it, Serbian society is not quite ready to listen to the Women in Black and the

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<sup>45</sup> Interview #9 with author

<sup>46</sup> Interview #7 by the author

<sup>47</sup> Interview #3 by the author

Youth Initiative, and while those are the organizations with a share of the money (although not an equal share), other organizations like 1389 (where most of civil society in Serbia ideologically agrees with) have no money.

*Personal responsibility towards dealing with the past:*

Each interviewee was asked the question regarding their opinions towards the personal responsibility they feel as Serbian citizens for events of the past. The answers I received were varied, some more detailed than others, and a lot of them reflected upon how they grew up in urban or rural Serbia.

Many people did acknowledge the importance of dealing with the past, whether or not they were involved in the voting process or not. One interviewee emphasized the fact that facing the past is not suppose to create guilt but understanding of the events which occurred in the name of their people. “For me it was always important to separate the guilt and the responsibility. If I am a citizen of this country I have responsibility to react on the actions of the government, if I voted or not. That is why I think there was responsibility for every citizen to be involved, not in daily politics, but to be involved with what is done<sup>48</sup>.”

Serbian society, however, beyond the people I spoke with, might not be prepared to deal with the past. During my fourth interview with a political science student from Belgrade, a lot was said about the Serbian society not being ready. Since the vast majority of people are not among the political elites and are not personally ready to start dealing with the past, and since no

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<sup>48</sup> Interview #8 by the author

politician is ready to tackle the issue whole-heartedly, this topic will not become an issue that individuals deal with any time soon.

It takes a certain distance for these things to be discussed. Kosovo isn't done yet, every day it is going to get nastier, it isn't something that you can look at, it needs distance. Right now I am afraid that my generation isn't the next generation to deal with the issues of responsibilities, and it will be another generation. More shit is going to happen; it will be very passionate and emotional. I am afraid it will be more than just worse<sup>49</sup>.

A lot of interviewees also emphasized the importance to look into the future instead of the past. Sometimes to deal with the past invokes the idea of nostalgia, being stuck in former events that cannot be fixed or changed. Although the facing process does not require an individual to feel guilt or shame, it does require, I think, for the individual to understand what their people have done from an objective and clear source. However, some interviewees still stressed the importance of looking to the future. "We must go to the future and not past and if we got to the past we need the facts. I am much more worried about how to deal with the future. It is not possible to make Croats feel better but it is important to try and find people from other parts of the world to talk about what happened there. We need to talk and realize everyone is guilty and everyone is a victim<sup>50</sup>."

In order for the wider society to acknowledge what happened, there is a need for self reflection and motivation to deal with the past as an individual living in this society. Keeping in mind Yerkes' definition of the facing process, I also came across some youth explaining that you must first deal with yourself before dealing with the past, something that is mainly found among the elites and academics.

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<sup>49</sup> Interview #5 by the author

<sup>50</sup> Interview # 6 by the author

These issues remain in the academic circles and the circle of two, it is something that these people who, what is it called post-material, once you pass satisfying your own existence you can work on the issues of responsibility. So people aren't apathetic in the sense that they don't care but apathetic because there are more important things. And once you reach a certain amount of political consciousness, like the issues of relations with the neighbors comes only after certain moments of dealing with yourself, which is you know, I feel like the issue of responsibility is also the issue of dealing with yourself<sup>51</sup>.

A few of the activists I talked to, who were directly involved in projects that aim at issues from the past, were very clear in their explanation of the importance for individuals to hold themselves personally responsible to reflect and inquire about their country's history.

If citizens from Serbia don't deal with the past then we will be left with open questions and those open questions are going to provide in the near or far future more conflicts and more wars. In order to establish peace and friendly relationship between the states or the people from different societies there is a necessity of facing the past and facing the law of your side, even if you didn't support that side, you are its citizens, part of the society which made, in which made the war crimes that were committed, so basically there is the answer "why is it necessity to deal with the past", not to repeat it anymore<sup>52</sup>.

Another activist said something similar. "Dealing with the past for me is facing the past. And when we see what we really happened and we can learn some kind of common history, we will respect that and hopefully we will remember what happened". Wanting to know what happened was also extremely important among the circles of activists and students. They are in the privileged position to seek out the information; however, not everyone in Serbia is in the same position, as previously discussed.

This is why it is important to have the government take charge to create objective information for the public that discover the truth about Serbian involvement in the wars in the

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<sup>51</sup> Interview #5 by author

<sup>52</sup> Interview # 9 by the author

1990s. Since that does not exist in a substantial form, sometimes the youth are found in situations where they are seen as mongrels, non-human, and as savages. “Mainly I don’t want things to repeat. I want to look at all the things that happened, I want to be proud because I am Serbian, so that I can say that in public and do that. Because of that, I want to know what happened<sup>53</sup>.” A younger student, non-activist, has the same kind of feeling towards dealing with the past. “We need to show people here in Serbia both sides. We were suffering but also some people were suffering because of us. I want people to wake up from the dream. People don’t have a picture of that. You must know from where you come to know where you are going. The roots here are bad. I won’t be free to walk on Trg Bana Jelačića<sup>54</sup> without dealing with the past<sup>55</sup>.” The urge to walk and talk freely with their neighbors was important to the interviewees. Whether they were involved in inter-cultural dialogue or not, I found that they spoke about bringing peace so that they could visit their neighboring countries without being scared<sup>56</sup>.

*The inter-youth generational gap:*

While all of the interviews I conducted were with university students or full-time employed activists, it was interesting to see why and how they began thinking about the past. Although differences were very clear among youth of similar ages, (for example when the representative from 1389 believed that to focus on the past would result in problems, whereas the representative from the Youth Initiative in Belgrade believed that the only way to move into the future was to face the past—meaning differences were not only found based on age) a big topic

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<sup>53</sup> Interview # 7 by author

<sup>54</sup> The main square in Zagreb, Croatia

<sup>55</sup> Interview #6 by the author

<sup>56</sup> Talking to a Serbian friend of mine one night, he was describing how he has always wanted to go to the Dalmatian Coast of Croatia. He hasn’t because he feels like by being a Serb, he wouldn’t be safe to do this.

that came up from the older aged youth I talked to was the inter-youth generational gap—and how the newest generation is quite ignorant of the past (and might stay that way if things continue the way they have been).

Throughout the interviewing process, I got the feeling that the older youth (25-30) had one vision of the past and how to deal with it, whereas the younger youth (18-25) saw things differently. There is a fear among the older youth that the younger generation, the generation that will soon enough have to start thinking of issues of the past in the political and social spheres, will not be able to handle it.

So now there are kids my age and younger, that on one side you have neo-Nazi groups which are connected to these growing ideologies. Now police are trying to do something after this march that happened in Novi Sad, the civil society and the public are disgusted that public is teaching about fascism and it is a good thing that is being discussed publicly [...] And I think the one reason for them to be so strong and to think about themselves like that is because we never had serious dealing with the past<sup>57</sup>.

Adolescents in Serbia today know little of their country's past. This is a combination of a lack of resources (specifically in the rural areas), and their disengagement with political and social issues (something that does not usually occur with most people until they are older or in college). Older youth also have clearer memories of what happened and what it was like to watch their government control the society like they did. They also had more experience, whether it was more school or more activism, and they have been exploring these issues longer than the younger youth I spoke to.

While visiting the small town in southeastern Serbia, the generation gap in experience, values, and opinions towards the past were very obvious. I witnessed a conversation between 18

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<sup>57</sup> Interview #8 by the author



high school students in this town, most of who were around the age of 15, and who came because they were invited by Women for Peace. I initiated a conversation surrounding this theme and what they thought about current NGO and Governmental initiatives focused on dealing with the past. The conversation soon turned into one without me, as they did not speak English well, and my southern Serbian was nowhere near perfection<sup>58</sup>. The women in charge of the organization took over, asking the teenagers about Srebrenica, the siege of Sarajevo, the fighting in Croatia, and other well-known events during the 1990s.

Through my broken understanding of the spit-fire Serbian that was coming out of these kid's mouths, a young woman sitting next to me, who worked for the organization, helped me gain some more understanding. "They are learning about all of these things for the first time", she said to me. And although I have read that the school system in rural areas in Serbia is limited, I never thought it would be limited and contrived to this extent.

Later on, I asked them all what they were learning about in school about these things. They looked surprised. All they had been learning about was the NATO bombing in Serbia in 1999 and seemed okay with this amount of information because they were so unaware of what was out there. Throughout the discussion, around 5 students left, then later 5 more. Those who stuck behind seemed interested in learning more. As the conversation was dwindling, I asked them if they wanted to continue to learn about these events and they said of course they did, they just do not know where to go with the information.

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<sup>58</sup> If it is hard for me to understand Serbian in Belgrade, it is even harder for me to understand it in the southern part of the country. I cannot describe the difference but it was significantly harder for me to understand what was going on.

But this was just one instance where the younger generation is so gaped from the older youth I spoke with. When interviewing the Youth Initiative in Novi Sad, they explained to me their views on the younger generation who are starting to become adults. “Young people between the ages of 23-28, they share our views. But the younger people, who don’t know what happened, they have issues because they don’t know what really happened”. When asking what kind of issues they have, they responded “They usually and mainly like the radical party. And when you ask them why, what do they do, what kind of policy do they have? They don’t know. So we try to talk to them and make them start thinking about things”.

Although fifteen years old is not usually the time most people begin critically thinking of the world around them, it still surprised me that they were only learning about the NATO bombings in 1999. Also, without a unique culture of peace created (to deal with the past), youth who begin learning this way might never stop learning this way—with their interests based on new gadgets, television, Big Brother<sup>59</sup>, and shopping. I see it in the United States too, even at college.

### **Discussion and Conclusions:**

So what can I extract from all of this that can be critical, analytical, and clear? A few things, although I am not so sure I can speculate on such short time and experience. But the truth is I have heard a lot, I have seen a lot, and I have witnessed a whole lot of emotions along the way.

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<sup>59</sup> A reality TV show in Belgrade—a certain amount of people are put in a house for X amount of months and have missions to accomplish

The government is not doing its job—to say the least. Issues of the past are on young people's minds whether they recognize it or not. Young people struggle with having the Serbian identity abroad by being pegged to the image of a maniacal aggressor. The Government is covering up issues of the past by focusing its energy on Kosovo. Everything stops because of Kosovo. The young people I spoke to see this, no matter what side of the ideological spectrum they come from. Schools are not what they should be, the economy is not what it should be, and employment is not getting much better. Rural to urban migration is affecting the countryside with uneven distribution of resources. People are still very unsure of what the past was and is thought of now. Young people are un-learning and re-learning things independently, in Universities, through group activities, and with their involvement in actions/activism in Serbia.

The Government is cooperating with the ICTY, however, at face value. To say you are sorry publicly to people you have hurt in the past is one thing, being honest and objective about it is another. Although I did not get to speak to young people from very rural Serbia, I could see that apologies must be strong, clear, and altruistic. By juxtaposing Serbia's wrongdoing with what might have happened to the Serbs by the Croats in the Second World War (Jasenovac is the biggest example), you are not truly apologizing.

The Hague tribunals in the Netherlands are not going as far as they should. Tax money is going to the families of the criminals, paying for commodities such as plane flights, hotels, and food. The Hague is bringing an objective perspective to what happened, but many Serbs feel it is uneven and discriminatory against them. Others see it as a necessary evil but still insufficient. The judicial system in Serbia is not in a place to handle these issues. The past is still very present but still ignored by most.

Some youth join forces with NGOs to find community and to try and make Serbia a place, and a people, they can be proud of. Some NGOs are highly criticized and misunderstood, with their western mechanisms and approaches, something that is seen as very inappropriate. The mere fact that Women in Black are grouped together with the Youth Initiative shows how non-activists homogenize NGOs together, when in fact; those two organizations are very different in style. The activists in the organizations say they are reaching people, while the non-activists say they are not approachable and too extreme. The more nationalistic organization, 1389, is working for the people, looking towards a grander future, and trying to keep the past out of it. They are feeding this side of the story to the public while organizations like Women in Black and the Youth Initiative for Human Rights are feeding the other side to the public—the side that clearly says what Serbia did when and that it is important to deal with these issues. People are confused and want to have a nice day. People want to move past what has happened and be able to easily feed their family.

But to be personally responsible is another matter. Many youth say that to move to the future you must first reconcile with the past. This is not about pushing guilt on the citizens of Serbia, rather it is important to understand what has happened, clearing away prejudices and age-old myths, and constructing a future where these misconceptions are reckoned with and healed. The scab has been picked too long, in a manner of speaking.

But are people ready to deal with it? Some say yes, it is never too early to begin, and some say no, that it is still too emotional. While the new generation is growing up, learning about the NATO bombings and nothing much else of their country's intense history, their minds have not been objectively molded by what has happened and what Serbia is and could be. So if the

past is not approached now, what will the next generation grow up thinking? In 50 years will another war break out?

This generational gap is scary to a lot of people in their late twenties, who were old enough to remember the realities and manipulations of war, and who saw groups of people form—whether it was the students of OTPOR fighting against the regime, the Women in Black standing silently to stop the war, or B92 radio giving a voice unheard to most of Serbia. They saw this, and they can see what is happening now. I agree that it seems scary—how young neo-Nazis could be living downstairs, how people are unable to travel without visas that are nearly impossible to get, and how people are stuck in myths created by the powerful government. It makes me question if the changes are effective, if the transition is moving past or staying stuck, and if responsibility is being ignored.

To be responsible is to be active, to understand, and to want to learn the truth. The truth is relative, depending on what historian you are learning from, what TV station you are watching, where you are living, and where your parents come from (as a few examples). Eric Gordy's book, *The Culture of Power in Serbia*, explains how the Milošević regime made alternatives disappear during the 1990s. Gordy explains, "Finally, the story of the destruction of alternatives is neither a story of the regime inflaming national passions nor even of the group in power generating public support. Rather, it is a narrative of the production of habituation, resignation, and apathy<sup>60</sup>" (6). This destruction of alternatives made it very hard to unlearn the things that the regime was creating, especially in rural areas. These learned myths created a sense of proud

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<sup>60</sup> Gordy, Eric D. *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Deconstruction of Alternatives*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999.

nationalism, one that flooded each person's home day after day during the 1990s. Some have learned to work with all of that, to fight for something better. Some people do not see that something better needs to be achieved. Personal responsibility towards dealing with the past, like one of the interviewees said, can really only come after one has dealt with their own lives first.

The only conclusion I can fairly make is that Serbia, through the eyes of young students and activists, should deal with the past but is not doing it in an effective way. Some people are invested in it, some are not. Some have different ideas of what the past was, and because of this, people active in dealing with the past have different approaches to bring it to Serbian society. I think that the amount of confusion and differing analyses coming from people's heads is a reflection of how Serbian people have been learning about their past, since 1389 to now, since the Second World War to now, and since the wars in the 1990s to right this moment. As the past continues to be covered up by one side and uncovered by the other, young children and teenagers are pushed into a distrustful and subjective atmosphere based on a past that is still unknown and unrealistic to those who are teaching it.

The truth is out there (I would like to think so) and young people want to know it. It is shown in different ways—through street activism, through the debate team at the University, through searching the internet and reading as many books as possible, and through traveling. Serbia is a small country, and as the complexities continue to thrive within the confusing past, the future might be built on very unsteady ground. There is no communication between the grass and the sky (the NGOs and the Government), and the grass can only soak in so much. People will always have their opinions, their political leanings, and their childhood environments which shape them. But without an objective source of information, untainted by international law,

another war could break out from the ever-present negativity between the neighbors of the Balkans. I will restate what one of the interviewees said: “I want people to wake up from the dream. People don’t have a picture of that. You must know from where you come to know where you are going. The roots here are bad.”

Dealing with the past is a process in which a society determines truthful facts of previous events, and with the support of civil society and its leaders, undergoes a transformation from a culture of conflict to one of peace, through the processes of reconciliation and depolarization. Truthful facts of the past have not been determined, there is some support from civil society and even less from Serbia’s leaders, and a culture of peace has not been created. The Serbian society is still very polarized, and might continue to drift apart with the new rising generation. If the youth do not start communicating, growing from each other’s views, ideas, and perspectives, dealing with the past might not come for a very long time.

### **Future Work:**

I am extremely interested in investing more time into this research. I had such a great experience visiting the other towns in Serbia, specifically the small town in the south, because it gave me a whole new perspective of the ideas coming out of the mouths of the youth I spoke to in Belgrade. The inactions of the government are creating the reactions of instable economy, unemployment, and little infrastructure (schools specifically), which I could plainly see in rural Serbia. Geographically, Serbia is very interesting with how people remember things, according to where they grew up. If they grew up on the Western side of Serbia, their memories of war

differ greatly from that of those who grew up on the eastern side. If they live in the South, they have a very different perspective on Kosovo than say, someone who lives in Novi Sad.

But more importantly, I want to dive deeper into the perspectives of the people without jobs, without much education, who are uninvolved in activism, or alternative education, who are without internet, or alternative media, or people who are religious. This perspective was missing in my research and it is extremely important in adding to the complexities found among Serbian youth.

For future research into this subject, with a substantial amount of time devoted to the country, I would suggest the following things: to spend a significant time in smaller town in central and southern Serbia and to get a good grasp of the resources in the towns, how they are still affected by brainwashing that did/did not happen in the 1990s from TV, radio, and other forms of news media. I would also suggest engaging with more NGOs, such as the Humanitarian Law Center, and youth involved in more legal-based organizations. A comparative study between youth perspectives here and in Republika Srpska (RS)<sup>61</sup> would also be extremely engaging. I would be very interested in seeing the differing opinions between youth living in Serbia and people living in RS and how their location effects/does not affect their views.

## **Appendices:**

### **A. Timeline of Interviews:**

1. October 19, 2007 | Male, 25, Political Science faculty (graduated) | Belgrade | Café (1 hr)

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<sup>61</sup> One of the two political entities making up Bosnia i Hercegovina (the other one being the Federation of Bosnia i Hercegovina)



2. October 19, 2007 | Female, 23, Student of English and English Literature | Belgrade | Café (2.5 hrs)
3. November 20, 2007 | Male, 22, activist in 1389 | Novi Belgrade | Café (2 hrs)
4. November 21, 2007 | Male, 23, student of Political Science, part time activist | Belgrade | café (1.5 hrs)
5. November 21, 2007 | Male, 23, student of Political Science and film, part time activist | Belgrade | Café (45 min)
6. November 23, 2007 | Focus group with 3 students from Political Science (ages 20, 21, 21), non activists | Belgrade (1.5 hrs)
7. November 26, 2007 | Focus group with 4 activists from Novi Sad Youth Initiative for Human Rights, 3 males 1 female (ages 23, 27, 21, 28) | Novi Sad, Vojvodina, Serbia (2 hrs)
8. November 27, 2007 | Female, 27, activist | LABRIS office (1.5h)
9. November 28, 2007 | Male, 26, Deputy Director of YIHR Belgrade | YIHR office (30 min)
10. November 30, 2007 | Sat in on a discussion with high school students in a small town in southeastern Serbia, 12 students (15 years old), 3 members of the organization Women for Peace, one male student (21 years old), one female artist who volunteers there (28 years old) and 2 female 18 year old students in high school (2 hours)
11. November 30, 2007 | YIHR Niš – Focus group (3 people, late 20s and early 30s), Apartment in Niš (3 hours)

## **B. NGOs and Organizations:**

- Women in Black
  - o Website: <http://www.zeneucnom.org>
  - o Mission: Make visible nonviolence resistance to militarism, war, sexism, nationalism. In short, all aspects of violence towards and discrimination against women and all those people different ethnically, religiously, culturally, sexually, and ideologically. Up to now they have organized around 700 peaceful actions on the street (protests, performances, campaigns...).
  - o Date of Establishment: 1991
- Youth Initiative for Human Rights
  - o Website: <http://www.yi.org.yu>
  - o Mission: To provide protection for the victims of violations of human rights, establish new connections between the post-war generations and enhance the participation of youth in the processes of transitional justice by promoting the truth about the wars in the former Yugoslavia. The Youth Initiative for Human Rights promotes the truth, justice, peace and equality as its core values. It operates in Belgrade, Priština, Podgorica and Sarajevo, with three local offices in Serbia - based in Kragujevac, Niš and Novi Sad.
  - o Date of Establishment: 2003
- Women for Peace
  - o Website: N/A

- Mission: Education and protection of woman, human rights the construction of peace and nonviolence.
- Date of Establishment: April 2007
- 1389
  - Website: [www.1389.org.yu](http://www.1389.org.yu)
  - Mission: To wake up the minds of Serbian Youth, etc (website in Cyrillic)
  - Date of Establishment: 2004

### **C. Interview Questions:**

- What is your current occupation, year in school, or other current situation?
- Where did you grow up? Who did you grow up with? Have you moved since then?
- What organization do you work for? (if activist). What does your organization do?
- Why did you decide to become an activist?
- While growing up in rural/urban Serbia, what TV programs, radio stations, newspapers, and other news sources, did you have access to?
- How did you first perceive Milošević? Did your perceptions change over time? What do you think of Otpor, did they effect your perceptions?
- What do you think about personal responsibility and accountability in dealing with the past?
- How important do you think it is to deal with the past?
- Why is it important to deal with the past?
- Do you think there is a significant amount of apathy and denial with youth today when thinking/dealing with the past?
- Do you think The Hague is effective? What do you think about alternative, non-legal ways, such as The Hague, in dealing with the past?
- How effective are current NGOs, like the Women in Black, the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, Humanitarian Law Center, B92, etc, in helping Serbian society deal with the past, reconcile with past events, and move into the future as the new Serbia? Are they effective? Do you think they are accessible?

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