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Dear Friends, Dear Bosnians (2010)

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It is not easy to speak about Srebrenica and the war in Bosnia here in front of you, because it brought you all here to this friendly country where you have found a new home. You have left your homes behind you as well as your memories of a past life, of your nearest and dearest.

You have brought your trauma with you, which you have tried to overcome here, or may still be carrying... As a paradigm of the Bosnian war, Srebrenica is a traumatic experience for all of you, but also for every person that feels empathy toward the suffering of others.

The world has been renewing the memory of the crime every year for the past fifteen years with the hope that nothing like this will ever happen again. That is what they had said after the Second World War. And still it did happen again, and not only in Bosnia. It happened for the whole world to see.

The Srebrenica genocide is a defeat, not only for Serbia but also for Europe, which failed to react in time. It is a defeat for the United Nations and its equidistance policy, its moral-equivalence policy which treated the victims and the perpetrators of the crime equally for the sake of staying neutral. One of the witnesses in the Milošević trial, Dr. Arria, spoke of deliberately wrong directives and unconcern of the highest UN officials toward the approaching tragedy in Bosnia and Hercegovina, which he called a "slow-motion genocide."

From a moral point of view, Srebrenica was a turning point in the Bosnian war, but was simultaneously a symbol of the indifference and disregard of the western countries. The Bosnian genocide took place in parallel with the Rwandan genocide, with about one million people killed, which the International Community also ignored.

Srebrenica also led to serious moral dilemmas in the world.

After this crime the American administration sped up the final strategy, which brought the leaders of the Balkans to Dayton. Some of the main culprits of the crime have been convicted at The Hague. Radovan Karadžić is also there today on trial for genocide. Only Ratko Mladić is still free and it is not certain when or if he will end up in The Hague at all. His arrest is being stalled for yet unknown reasons. Many manipulations are involved. It has gone so far that his family has asked for him to be declared legally dead, and newspapers are full of writings about his diaries.

The Republic of Srpska government even prepared a report of its own on the Srebrenica genocide, which it later disavowed.

The European Parliament has in the meantime adopted a Declaration that binds all European countries to honour the 11th of July as a Memorial Day for the crime of Srebrenica. Previously the International Court of Justice had reached a verdict in the lawsuit of Bosnia and Hercegovina against Serbia for genocide and aggression. It is known that for lack of evidence (the most important evidence was unavailable to the ICJ because of Carla Del Ponte's agreement with Belgrade) a verdict was reached in which Serbia is absolved of direct responsibility for the genocide, but is responsible for not stopping the genocide. You know, just as I do, that Serbia's involvement was unquestionable. We do not need the ICJ verdict to know this.

The Parliament of Serbia has recently adopted a Declaration that accepts the verdict of the International Court without explicitly mentioning the word genocide. It has indirectly taken the responsibility. However, this is an important step toward even a partial acknowledgment of the crime.

President Tadić's initiative to adopt a Srebrenica Resolution has started a debate which laid bare Serbian frustration and denial, and thus refusal to confront recent history, especially regarding the war in Bosnia. The existence of the Republic of Srpska and the fact that it has been there for fifteen years has given the Serbian elite an impression that fulfilling their goals completely is only a matter of time.

The depth of this mainstream way of thinking is additionally laid bare through the reactions of the program's advocates. They accuse the president, the Serbian government and the Parliament of "risky, dissident short-minded national and state policy." This circle denies Serbia the right to Europeanize, which would require the recognition of the Srebrenica crimes, because this is something that "incompetent politicians, corrupted intellectuals and some other media preach." The current government is accused of accepting "Jihad- fundamentalist Bosniak propaganda lies about Serbian genocide in Bosnia and Srebrenica" and of "conscienceless and irresponsible assimilation of our war crimes to an alleged 'holocaust' of Muslims, counting and multiplying our crimes and disregarding Bosniak and Croatian crimes - thus making our descendants members of a genocidal people equal to Nazi Germany."

Most of the parliamentary parties sought to pass two resolutions, one of which would condemn the crimes against Serbs. The conservative bloc in Parliament advocated the terminology "the most dreadful crime", "a crime" or "severe crime."

As he undertook the initiative for passing a Srebrenica resolution, Boris Tadić was aware that it would not meet with wide approval in Serbia nor in the Republic of Srpska, but that it was the duty of the Serbian Parliament to adopt it. He added that the "politicians are those who have to be able to bear responsibility for such political decisions, because that is what they are elected to do, and then they are accordingly punished or rewarded for this on election day." His initiative was the result of many circumstances: pressures from the outside, the economic reality in which Serbia lives and the realization that only through change on this point can Serbia expect faster movement towards the EU.

Faced with the resistance of the majority of the political establishment, Tadić stressed that the sympathy for the victims of Srebrenica does not in any way exclude Serbia's right and obligation to remember and honour its victims and the sufferings which Serbian people have gone through.

Regarding proposals to pass two resolutions, he said "As for the second resolution, on Serbian victims, any people that disregarded its own victims would again be committing a bad deed ethically speaking. I consider it an obligation of Serbia to adopt such a resolution. But, for the very reason that we shouldn't pass only one resolution, that we must show empathy and the ability to share in other people's pain, I think that the two resolutions should be adopted, and not both the same day."

Here I need to stress that one part of the Serbian public, in particular a certain number of nongovernmental organizations, have been advocating passage of a Srebrenica resolution for years, and since the European Parliament adopted their resolution, every 11th day in the month the representatives of these organizations have stood in front of the building of presidency and urged President Tadić to start the initiative for a resolution. Pressure from the civil sector is constant and has created an atmosphere of Serbian moral obligation to take a stand on this issue.

They introduced the first draft resolution in the Serbian Assembly in 2005 through Nataša Mičić (GSS - Civil Alliance of Serbia) and Žarko Korać (SDU - Social Democratic Union). That same year a group of eight NGO's held a public forum and several other manifestations on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide. They called for condemnation of the genocide and the denunciation of the policies that led to it. That year several other manifestations marked the 10th Anniversary, but with opposite polarity; a forum held at the Belgrade University Law Faculty, with the participation of professors from the Faculty, sought to negate the crime.

Genocide denial

Genocide denial has gained in strength especially after the International Court of Justice's verdict, most of all in academic circles. Numerous books have been written based on the thesis that Srebrenica was invented in order to blacken the Serbian people, that those were soldiers, that there were no more than two thousand killed... Apart from that, parallel with denying the number killed and the genocide, a monument was erected in Bratunac, in close proximity to Srebrenica, for three thousand Serbian victims. In this way Srebrenica is always mentioned along with another place name - Bratunac. The 12th of July, which is only one day after the Srebrenica genocide remembrance, is the day of remembering Serbian victims.

This manipulation is legitimized, because it has been repeated so many times that much effort is needed to deny it and tell the real truth about Bratunac. It is dangerous, most of all for the young generations who have neither the knowledge nor the wish to know more about it. It creates a vicious circle of manipulations and lies. It isn't possible to stop future genocides and crimes against humanity if we don't understand the truth of Srebrenica and its predecessors.

The Hague Tribunal has reached a verdict of genocide in several cases, meaning that it is an undeniable truth, and the International Court of Justice has confirmed it also.

The Srebrenica Women have travelled across Serbia and spoken about it. However, accepting the truth will be a long and reluctant process.

Nevertheless the debate about a Declaration has set in motion the question of responsibility, despite heavy resistance among the public as well as the academic community. The growing pressure from the international community has created a feeling that some resolution must be adopted, and the only question is in what form it will be.

However, a Declaration won't have its full meaning unless it is "translated" into a language the public can understand, unless it is included in school textbooks, unless it becomes the official truth, unless the media start talking about it with full respect for the facts etc.

The Serbian elite has attained a sense that EU integration calls for certain moral gestures for which it is not ready. However, there is a recognition of the inevitability of this act; the discussion on Srebrenica has shown what the balance of power is in society. The continuance of the debate on a resolution has to connect with the responsibility to arrest Ratko Mladić. Only then will the resolution have its full meaning; that implies that the verdicts of Hague Tribunal become the part of the official truth in Serbia. Unless this happens, the Declaration will have only a commercial significance.

The culture of denial is also reflected in the dominant political discourse. Many crimes are no longer denied, but are being justified or relativized.

The denial blocks normalization of relations with Bosnia and Hercegovina. Without analyzing the political and social context in which the genocide was possible, no reconciliation is possible either.

It is well known that denial is a nearly invariable rule in post-conflict narrations. The international community has so far made its support to countries in the region conditional on their cooperating with the Hague tribunal. Serbia is, of course, in a special situation, because it has waged four wars, and because it supported and took part in genocide in Bosnia. Its cooperation has so far been cooperation for gain. There has been no true remorse or acceptance of responsibility.

The international community missed its chance to make Serbia fulfil moral obligations toward the region and the world. In this sense the opportunity has been lost to devote attention to society itself, which has been the target of anti-European propaganda for more than two decades.

To make it possible there are two alternatives:

- to make sure that education, that main instrument of ideology, covers the decade of the 1990s and speaks objectively about responsibility;
- or to criminalize the deniers, which in the case of Serbia means numerous members of the elite. This means adopting a law, as in Germany and some other European countries, which punishes genocide denial.

Can we expect this in the foreseeable future? Unfortunately, I think not.

As long as Bosnia has three different narratives on recent history which several generations have grown up on, it is hard to speak of reconciliation. For reconciliation,

Serbia will need a brave and determined elite which is now lacking.

One thing more:

Bosnia is now a non-functional country, as a consequence of the Dayton Agreement which blocked the integration of Bosnia. Furthermore, the international community has not created the necessary framework for reconciliation. Two truth and reconciliation commissions have failed, again because of the “principle” of neutrality, because three narratives were spoken of, equalizing the victim’s and executioner’s positions.

Bosnia is a hostage to the unfinished regional stabilization process and the aspirations of Belgrade. Until Belgrade’s claims are fundamentally rebutted, regional stability will be fragile, and Bosnia will remain the hostage of these claims.

Numerous high-level regional meetings are under way with the aim of creating a regional cooperation framework. This is certainly accelerated by the economic situation of all countries in the region individually, and by outside circumstances. Solidarity may be created based on the need to economically cooperate.

However, the basic needs will remain- to explain the causes for the breakdown of Yugoslavia, to explain the role of Serbian elites in the war preparations, and then to identify all crimes that occurred on the former Yugoslavian territory.

There is a huge documentation on this already, especially at the Hague Tribunal. It is a heritage still untouched, so to speak. It will play an important part in illuminating the Serbian elites’ role.

And in the end, what does this mean for you here and all other Bosnians who have found refuge in all parts of the world? It is hard to expect that Bosnia will recover, that its social tissue can heal. It has gone through demographic collapse. Decades will be needed. Bosnia is divided, Srebrenica is, so to say, without Muslims, apart from a few women guarding the graves of their nearest and dearest. As long as those women are alive, their presence will be a reminder. And then...

What has the world done for those women...? Essentially nothing. It has not created conditions for return and normal life.

Srebrenica is a part of the Serbian entity, and policemen who took part in the events of 1995 are now walking around in it.

Some of those convicted for the genocide in Bosnia are already at liberty and praised as Serbian heroes. For example, Biljana Plavšić and others.

Here today, and most likely in many other parts of the world, we speak of Srebrenica as a symbol of human evil and a symbol of the international community’s powerlessness to put an end to it.

And Bosnia has been left divided and all attempts to rescue it have so far been unsuccessful. Today, Bosniaks are suspected of religious fundamentalism. The first to do this are Serbian nationalistic instigators, who seek to justify the war in Bosnia. According to them, Muslim fundamentalism was the main reason for the collapse of

Yugoslavia, and today, as they say, the same danger faces Serbia. That's why Sandžak is under constant tension.

The neutrality and relativization which the international community imposed upon recent history has prevented any serious coming to grips with the past. Two attempts to set up truth and reconciliation commissions in Bosnia have failed because of it. That is not good for the future of Bosnia, nor for that of Serbia, because it contributes to denial and relativization.

Furthermore, as concerns Serbia, its moral recovery will take longer and can only occur on condition of being capable to publicly condemn the planners of the project, who still have influence on strategic decision-making for the future of Serbia. Here I first and foremost mean its relations with Bosnia. The war in Bosnia is treated in those circles as a "war of liberation", and Radovan Karadžić as the main creator of the - I have to say, internationally recognized - Republic of Srpska.

Since the Berlin Congress in 1878, the Balkan peoples have traversed a dramatic path of emancipation. Many of them have, like the Bosniaks, been hampered in their efforts to assert their identity. They succeeded in doing so in the Second (post-World War II) Yugoslavia, and additionally confirmed it in the war in the nineties, even though they paid the most terrifying cost for it.

There are attempts to destroy physically some peoples, to eradicate them, but their urge for freedom and an identity of their own cannot be stopped. That may be the only thing we've learned so far from the genocide in Bosnia.

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