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Two schools under one roof

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Segregated schooling, called “two schools under one roof” (Dvije škole pod jednim krovom), is common in the central and southern parts of the country primarily populated by Muslims (Bosniaks) and Croats.

As the term suggests, the main features of the system are that students effectively constitute two distinct schools in one building. Students attend school in two shifts, with a long break in between to minimize contact. In some schools, they enter in different entrances or must use different stairwells, or risk disciplinary action – by teachers or other students. They use different textbooks, have different teachers, and even an entirely different administrative system. Even in so-called ‘unified’ schools such as the Mostar Gymnasium, Bosniak and Croat students are enrolled in different curricula – together in gym class and in the computer lab, but learning apart in different language, religion, geography, and history classes. Indeed, at the heart of segregated schooling is the reification of supposedly irreconcilable identities: while Bosniak students learn Bosnian history, Croat students learn the history of neighbouring Croatia. While Bosniak students are taught the language they speak according to newly minted rules of Bosnian grammar and spelling, Croat students are taught the same language using Croatian grammatical standards.

Resistance to segregation has popped up in several Bosnian towns in the past years, led mostly by students themselves. Most recently, resistance to segregating previously unified schools in Jajce led to continued protests by students, who threatened to boycott classes if a separate Bosniak institution was created.

Beginning in the summer of 2016, the students in Jajce, a small town in central Bosnia, organized protests and creative actions in opposition to a plan by local government officials to divide high school students based on ethnic identity. The plan to create a new high school serving only Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) students would further the policy of “two schools under one roof”.

Students of all backgrounds marched through the center of town carrying flags to represent all three ethno-national groups – Croatian, Serbian and Bosnian – living in Jajce, and began to speak publicly about their plan to organize resistance to the new school.

Despite discouragement from community members, classmates and often their own

parents, the students continued to speak out against the segregation plan. The students gave interviews with numerous media outlets and held classroom walk-outs, eventually gaining support from leaders in the international community who exert considerable influence on Bosnia and Herzegovina's political system. Some teachers joined in supporting the students, despite risking their jobs and reputations for standing against local political leaders.

Young people from around the country joined the Jajce students by holding rallies in their own towns, drawing nationwide attention to the continued practice of "two schools under one roof." In June 2017, the government of the Central Bosnian Canton officially dropped the plan to segregate their high school — a resounding success for the small band of students who sparked a national conversation on the future of divided schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Now they are the recipients of a prestigious award for their courage and persistence. The students were named winner of the 2018 Max van der Stoel Award — a \$58,600 prize awarded by an international jury through the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, or OSCE. The award is given every two years for outstanding achievements in promoting integration and social cohesion in OSCE countries.

The award was established in 2001 by the Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is named after renowned Dutch statesman Max van der Stoel, who became the first OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in 1993.

The prize is a significant recognition of the students' tenacity and bravery in standing up to their political leaders, and may motivate future student actions to promote school integrations across Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Nikolas Rimac, one of the high school students who led the effort against segregation in Jajce, said he hopes the funds will help establish a foundation for student activism in the future.

"Three constituent peoples [Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs] live in our country, and it is wrong that we are being taught only about our differences. I believe that together we can achieve much more. Education should look towards the future, not the past, and that desire was our motive," Ajla Vrebac, a former secondary school pupil in Jajce, said at the award ceremony.

There are still 30 educational establishments using the 'two schools under one roof' model in the country, despite criticism both domestically and internationally.

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