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Reimagining the Post-War City: Symbolic Landscape Transformation and Reconciliation in Brčko District



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Abstract

In the aftermath of a violent conflict, the pursuit of reconciliation is both a moral imperative and a complex political challenge. This paper explores the mechanisms through which post-conflict societies attempt to rebuild social cohesion, address historical injustices, and foster sustainable peace.

This article examines the strategies introduced by the international community in Brčko District between 1999 and 2012 to foster reconciliation, along with the local reactions and interpretations of these efforts. Grounded in field research conducted in the Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina—a unique multi-ethnic and administratively autonomous region—the paper offers a case study of reconciliation and war memorialisation efforts in a post-Dayton framework.

The Brčko experience illustrates the tensions between imposed political solutions and locally-driven healing processes, highlighting both the potential and fragility of co-existence in deeply divided societies. It shows that despite international efforts to create a neutral environment, local communities felt alienated from the success narrative and remained deeply divided. Ultimately, the paper argues that meaningful reconciliation requires inclusive dialogue, long-term commitment, and an honest reckoning with the past—recognising that healing is as much a political process as it is a personal and communal one.

Keywords

Conflict · Reconciliation · Peacebuilding · Bosnia and Herzegovina · Memorial



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Reimagining the Post-War City: Symbolic Landscape Transformation and Reconciliation in Brčko District

Reconciliation in post-conflict societies is a critical step towards sustainable peace and national healing. It involves acknowledging past atrocities, fostering dialogue between former adversaries, and building trust in institutions that may have been complicit in the violence. Effective reconciliation helps to break the cycles of hatred and retaliation by promoting justice, truth-telling, and forgiveness. It also lays the groundwork for inclusive governance, economic recovery, and social cohesion, allowing citizens to rebuild their lives in an environment of mutual respect.

However, the process of reconciliation is fraught with challenges. Deep-seated trauma, lingering resentment, and the desire for revenge can hinder efforts to create an open and honest dialogue. Often, there is a tension between the pursuit of justice and the need for stability—prosecuting perpetrators may alienate powerful groups, while ignoring past crimes risks perpetuating a culture of impunity. Moreover, rebuilding trust in public institutions and ensuring equitable representation for all groups requires time, resources, and political will, which are often in short supply in post-conflict settings.

This article focuses on understanding the complex, nuanced, and unpredictable process of reconciliation in post-conflict societies. It draws on data collected over several months of field research in Brčko District, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The first field research was conducted as part of wider research on peacebuilding in Brčko District in 2017 (May to October) and additional research was done in 2023 (June to August). The interviews included local political officials, NGO representatives, religious leaders, and citizens of various ethnic backgrounds. Interviews were conducted in local languages and used open-ended questions that allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions. This agreed with the bottom-up approach, which revealed additional insights and a more comprehensive understanding of local perspectives.

With the history of ethnic cleansing, concentration camps and war crimes followed by the establishment of a multi-ethnic system of governance under international supervision, Brčko represents a valuable case study for understanding the multi-layered process of reconciliation in divided societies.

The establishment of Brčko District emerged from the failure to resolve its status during the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement negotiations due to its strategic position and geopolitical importance. Control over Brčko was highly contested, particularly by Republika Srpska, as it provided a vital territorial link between its eastern and western regions. Its proximity to both Croatian and Serbian borders and the fact that it hosted the biggest river port in this region placed additional strategic value. To prevent renewed conflict, the matter was deferred to international arbitration, resulting in a 1999 ruling that created Brčko District as a self-governing, neutral territory under the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina but outside the jurisdiction of either entity. The decision placed the District under direct international supervision, led by an appointed Supervisor with a mandate to build a multi-ethnic administration and maintain peace and stability.

Under international oversight, Brčko District developed inclusive, multi-ethnic institutions, including an integrated police force, unified administration, and a single judicial system. Special emphasis was placed on education, leading to the establishment of multi-ethnic schools where students from all communities could study under a shared curriculum—an uncommon achievement in post-war Bosnia. The district also became notable for its successful return of displaced persons and refugees, with thousands of families reclaiming



their pre-war homes and rebuilding their lives. These advancements made Brčko were demonstrated as a rare success story and a testing ground for post-conflict reconciliation, offering valuable lessons on coexistence, institutional integration, and the potential of international engagement in divided societies.

This article examines the strategies introduced by the international community in Brčko District between 1999 and 2012 to foster reconciliation, along with the local reactions and interpretations of these efforts. It begins by outlining the background of the conflict and ethnic cleansing in Brčko to provide context for the challenges faced by the international community in promoting reconciliation. It then examines the transformation of the symbolic landscape—such as the renaming of streets and the introduction of script equality—as well as efforts in memorialisation, monument construction, and the promotion of Brčko District's unique character. In conclusion, the field research presented in this article reveals that, despite a widespread narrative of successful reconciliation, actual progress has been limited. Many citizens felt disconnected from the policies and alienated by the supervisory regime. Reconciliation was often perceived as imposed and artificial—mathematical and rigid in nature—failing to acknowledge individual experiences and traumas. The lack of reflection on the war period was locally interpreted as the internationally fostered culture of collective amnesia that denied the communities the opportunity to face the past and acknowledge their suffering. The recurring expression of feeling trapped in a farce where nothing was genuine indicates the level of citizens' detachment from the story of successful reconciliation.

War in Brčko and the Establishment of the District

For most of its history, Brčko was richly multiethnic and the demographics generally reflected the distribution of peoples in the region—Croats, Serbs, Muslims, Roma, Jews, and others. The last population census prior to the dissolution of Yugoslavia showed that the town's population of over 87 thousand inhabitants comprised of 44% Muslims, 21% Serbs, 25% Croats and 10% Others (Statisticki godisnjak Jugoslavije 1991).

Following the referendum in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the subsequent declaration of independence in March 1992, hostilities erupted with Serb forces blowing up the vehicular and railway bridges in Brčko. Between 70 and 100 civilians died while crossing the bridge (Balkan Insight 2015). The destruction of the bridge was the first act of violence that shattered any remaining hope that conflict in Brčko could be avoided.

In the weeks and months that followed, the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), locally mobilised Serbs, and Serbian paramilitary groups carried out ethnic cleansing against non-Serbs living in the area (Farrand, 2011, p. 2). Non-Serb populations were rounded up and expelled or killed, and houses and places of worship were destroyed in order to deter any possible hopes of return (Perry, 2006, p. 3) Thousands more were rounded up in collection centres or imprisoned in concentration camps, with the systematic killing of mostly Muslim detainees predominantly taking place at or near the Laser Bus Company, the Brčko police station, and Luka camp (Farrand, 2011, p. 2). In the Final Report of the United Nations Commission of Experts, published in May 1994, 28 camps were identified throughout the Brčko municipality (United Nations 1994, par. 86, cited in Farrand 2011).

The most notorious concentration and extermination camp in Brčko was located in the town's port facilities Luka. The first prisoners were taken there on May 7, 1992, and the available documents show that the camp was closed down two months later on 9 July 1992. During this period, civilians (including women and children) were systematically tortured, raped and murdered. Two men, Goran Jelisić who referred to himself as the "Serbian Adolf" and Ranko Česić, were tried and sentenced for crimes against humanity by



the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) at the Hague for their part in the atrocities in the Luka camp. The eyewitness and the surviving prisoner of the Luka camp report:

"I remember it was Sunday, May 10. They came and brought lamb meat and alcohol with them. They ate and drank for the whole day. They entered the port hangar twice. The first time, they started counting us from one to three and took number one and three out; the second time, they took number three. Everyone that was taken out was murdered. Then they would choose two people to move the corpse and murder them afterward. Then they would choose two more and this circle of killing continued for three nights straight. Those were the bloodiest nights in Luka. They killed hundreds of people then." (Mestrovic-Kuka 2015, author's own translation).

Primary and secondary mass graves have been found in various locations in Brčko (the first one being in the compound of the meat factory Bimeks and the largest secondary mass grave discovered in 2006 in the village of Gorice, holding the remains of 277 victims). The mass grave that hides the highest number of remains is the River Sava, considering that the Luka camp was located at the riverbank, providing a quick and easy solution to removing the corpses.

Mass rapes of girls and women aged 13 to 60 were also reported in the Luka camp but also in other locations throughout the city (most notably, the restaurant Westfalia and the hotel Galeb) (Muratović-Kuka 2015; Farrand 2011). The Helsinki Watch report (1993) estimates that few hundreds of women were raped in Westfalia alone.

The atrocities against the citizens were followed by the destruction of all Islamic objects, including three city mosques (Džedid mosque known as the White Mosque, Hadži-Pašina mosque, and Atik mosque) and eight mosques in the surrounding villages. All other buildings related to Islamic education and Islamic cultural institutions were also destroyed, including the complete destruction of the Archives of the Islamic Community. One respondent, a Bosniak woman who remained hiding in her flat in the city centre, described the destruction of the town's mosques:

'It was 17 August 1992. It took 40 minutes to blow up and destroy all three town mosques. Within a few days, they cleaned up the area, planted grass over it and used it as a parking place. It was as if no mosque was ever there. (Bosniak, 68)

Brčko was being ethnically 'cleansed' not only of its inhabitants but also of its past, and this process included the removal of all symbols and traces of Muslim heritage. The streets were renamed to celebrate the Serbian national heroes, signs were changed to Cyrillic script and monuments were erected to Četnik leaders such as Draža Mihailović. The official Serb terminology for taking over the city was "a liberation," and this rhetoric is still used and inscribed into a massive concrete monument in the city centre built to commemorate "the Serb liberators of Brčko".

A couple of months into the war, the town and its surrounding areas were completely taken by Serb forces and the non-Serb population was pushed to surrounding villages where they remained until the end of the war. As non-Serbs fled or were forced out, Serbs from other parts of the country resettled in Brčko. These demographic changes meant that by the end of the war, the formerly diverse population was now 97,5 percent Serb. (ICG, 2003, p. 3)



Following three years of intense conflict, the international community exerted strong pressure to end the war in Bosnia. The Dayton Agreement, signed in December 1995, formally ended the war and divided the country into two entities. However, due to Brčko's strategic importance and the scale of ethnic cleansing in the area, its status remained unresolved during the Dayton negotiations. The matter was referred to international arbitration and was settled nearly four years later, when Brčko was designated as a semi-independent condominium under international supervision. It was decided that a district would be established—one that would belong equally to all ethnic groups, featuring multiethnic institutions, an inclusive education system, and shared public spaces, where all citizens would feel a sense of equal belonging. This was a unique experiment in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, where, unlike other cities that remained divided—with minimal communication between ethnic groups, the "two schools under one roof" system, and low rates of refugee return—Brčko aimed to foster integration and coexistence.

Reconciliation in Brčko District

The concept of reconciliation finds its roots in various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, law, religious studies, and theology. Some authors argue that reconciliation was first "rooted in biblical texts and ancient languages" (Philpott, 2006, p. 11), and that this religious discourse of forgiveness and remorse was later combined with more secular notions of justice and human rights and applied in concrete international interventions.

While reconciliation has been relatively under-investigated in international relations, recent years have seen a growing number of studies attempting to define and theoretically capture its role and significance in the peace process. Reconciliation has been variously defined as "closure plus healing" (Galtung, 1998, p. 64), as "mutually conciliatory accommodation between former antagonists" (Long & Brecke, 2003, p. 1), and as "the former belligerents accepting each other not only diplomatically, but also psychologically" (Kelman, 1999, p. 198).

The understanding of reconciliation can be broadly divided into two main categories. The first is normative, which focuses on moral aspects such as truth-telling, empathy, forgiveness, and the emotional healing of communities. The second approach is political and represents a more pragmatic view of reconciliation as a process of rebuilding and strengthening a stable and peaceful political community. What is common to both approaches is the view of reconciliation as a process involving multiple parties, whose relationships and perceptions of the 'Other' can be transformed. The success of transforming these social relations is directly linked to the likelihood of achieving sustainable peace.

In the aftermath of the conflict, Brčko District adopted a range of reconciliation mechanisms under the guidance of international supervision, aimed at rebuilding trust among its ethnically divided communities. One of the key approaches was the institutional integration of governance structures, ensuring equal representation of Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs in public administration, the judiciary, and law enforcement. The establishment of a unified, multi-ethnic police force and civil service played a crucial role in promoting fairness and reducing ethnic bias in public life. These institutions operated under strict anti-discrimination policies, supported by continuous training and monitoring from the Office of Brčko Supervisor, fostering a sense of shared ownership and accountability across ethnic lines.

Education reform was another vital reconciliation mechanism. Brčko became the first area in Bosnia and Herzegovina to implement a unified school system, with a single curriculum designed to reflect inclusivity and mutual respect. Students from all ethnic backgrounds attended the same schools, helping to reduce



prejudice and foster interethnic understanding from a young age. The District also supported the return of displaced persons and refugees through property restitution, housing reconstruction, and community reintegration programmes, facilitating the physical and social return of pre-war residents. Public awareness campaigns, interethnic dialogue initiatives, and support for civil society organisations further strengthened local reconciliation efforts. Together, these measures positioned Brčko District as a rare example of practical and institutionalised reconciliation in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The establishment of the District by international actors—against the will of local actors—had the explicit goal of creating a ‘neutral’ territory, free from ethnonational affiliations, where citizens would identify primarily as residents of the District rather than as members of ethnonational groups. The emphasis on consensus and civic identity, rooted in a liberal democratic political framework, was expected to gradually erode divisions and facilitate reconciliation. Despite the fact that these reforms were initiated and promoted unilaterally by the Supervisor—and often met with resistance from local actors—there was a consistent effort to portray them as locally driven and inspired by a collective desire to live together. Marking the anniversary of the District’s establishment in 2009, former Supervisor Raffi Gregorian stated that Brčko’s success depended *“first and foremost on the efforts of the people of Brčko, who decided to live together, and in peace”* (Gregorian, 2009).

To declare reconciliation a success entails the assumption that reconciliation is an endpoint and not a process but also that we have an idea of what a reconciled community looks like. It assumes that there is a linear movement and progression from pre-conflict to conflict and to reconciliation. An alternative view would be to define reconciliation as a continuous process of redefining mutual relations that is never complete or explicit. By declaring peacebuilding in Brčko a success, it is clear that reconciliation was defined as a point that could be identified and achieved.

In Brčko District, reconciliation was approached in rigid, mathematical terms. Schools and public institutions were integrated in proportions reflective of ethnonational populations, with little regard for the deeper, more complex dimensions of the process or the insecurity surrounding it. In the long run, this approach undermined the possibility of citizens developing a genuine multicultural civic identity, instead making them feel insecure about their future in the District.

Likewise, the post-conflict strategy adopted in Brčko emphasised ‘forgetting’ and actively avoided public discussion of war crimes, victims, or the punishment of perpetrators. In some ways, confronting the trauma of conflict became taboo, and silence about the war evolved into an accepted social norm. Citizens were expected to accept the authority of the supervisory regime, which promoted a hybrid unity (Jeffrey, 2004, p. 148). However, their own experiences and perceptions often failed to align with the international narrative, creating a dissonance that led them to attach varying meanings to their everyday interactions.

Politics of Healing: Symbols and Meanings

The international effort to integrate ethnonational communities and make people think in terms of Brčko District was seen as a crucial aspect of successful reconciliation. While the early peacebuilding efforts were dominated by the reconstruction of homes and infrastructure, the Supervisor soon acknowledged the need to transform the symbolic landscape in a way that would reflect the District’s new multi-ethnic character. In order to fully promote the neutrality of the district, it was necessary to address the issue of symbols and monuments and establish the appropriate and acceptable ways of commemorating the past. The Final



Award briefly addressed this issue by declaring the political and ethnic neutrality of the symbols in the District:

“The District Assembly shall determine all symbols for the District, provided that all such symbols shall be politically and ethnically neutral and subject to the approval of the Supervisor. There shall be no specific flag for the District, but the flag of one entity will not be flown without the other being on essentially equal terms. Both the Latin and Cyrillic letters will be used on essentially equal terms for all official purposes.” (Final Award, paragraph 11 in OHR, 2000a: 286)

The first step was to rename the streets in a way that would reflect Brčko's post-conflict demographics and the neutral character of the new regime. For example, the former Bulevar Draže Mihailovića was renamed to Bulevar Mira (Boulevard of Peace) and the main square was renamed Youth Square (Trg Mladosti). The street plates were written both in Latin and Cyrillic scripts and designed in the blue and yellow colours of the Bosnian flag. The goal behind renaming the streets was two-fold: first, to abolish particular nationalist myths and second to stimulate a collective identity for Brčko. This was a unique effort within post-conflict Bosnia considering that other cities encouraged symbols that evoked collective memory and strengthened group identity.

Jeffrey (2004) identifies three categories of names chosen for the renaming strategy. The first were those intended to inspire a general multi-ethnic reconciliation (peace, youth, etc.). The second group of names was designed to neutralise international intervention and connect Brčko to other regions (Dejtonska, Sarajevska, Mostarska). The third and the largest group of names are those invoking the shared Yugoslav past and individuals that enjoyed universal popularity (Nikola Tesla, Ivo Andric, etc.) The naming strategy did not only refer to renaming the streets but also the schools in the district. It was decided to remove the names of prominent national figures and only use numbers (“First primary school,” “Second primary school” etc.).

While there was no open opposition to this move, citizens continued to feel little connection to the new names and in daily communication mostly used the names from the pre-war period. For example, any mention of “Fifth primary school” would be followed by immediate “Do you mean Đuro Pucar Stari school or Jelenka Vočkić, which one is fifth?” Another common reaction to the new names was that of mockery:

“Brčko became sort of an imaginary place... I mean just look at our street names, boulevard of peace, youth square...it's like some hippie place where everything is about peace, love, flowers... [...] in reality most people would rather name their kids' school or the street where they live after some nationalist leader or war criminal. “ (Bosniak, 29)

Media reports published after the announcement of the new street names revealed the sense of discontent and petty disagreements over the number and the length of streets attributed to individual ethnic communities. For example, the Serbs argued that Croats, as the least populous community in the District, were significantly over-represented in the number of streets carrying the names of prominent Croatian figures. They also argued that Croats and Bosniaks gained' central and long streets while Serbs were only granted much shorter, side streets (Politika 2007).

The naming strategy avoided any reference to the 1992-95 conflict in an attempt to guide the public consciousness away from remembering the events such as “ethnic cleansing” or “concentration camps.” The lack of memorialisation of the conflict led the people to feel increasingly frustrated with what is sometimes labelled as internationally encouraged collective amnesia. The failure of the Supervisor to address these



issues caused frustration as there was an increasing need to acknowledge war crimes as a prerequisite to reconciliation and healthy inter-ethnic relations. One respondent described reconciliation as intangible and impossible to achieve without facing past crimes:

"In all honesty, reconciliation is such an abstract term, light years away from where I stand." Maybe I can consider reconciliation once they discover my father's remaining bones because so far, they've found only two, in two separate mass graves." (Bosniak, 32).

Another respondent described the international reconciliation strategies in Brčko as too naive and incapable of addressing the underlying issues:

"They don't understand the level of destruction that happened here. It's not just the physical destruction of buildings or the loss of lives; it's the destruction of the very social fabric that used to bond us together, the destruction of trust and brotherhood that we truly felt. If some foreign power came and attacked us, the war would not leave such deep scars and we would recover much faster. But being attacked by your own colleagues, your neighbours, sometimes even family members is a whole other level of betrayal." (Bosniak, 56).

Another important issue that arises from this discussion is the paradoxical existence and absence of war memorialisation in Brčko with the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) acting as a substitute for a broader "truth commission" (Jeffrey 2004). Rather than contributing to establishing facts and recognised truths and incorporating them into Brčko's symbolic landscape, the ICTY merely investigated and convicted two individuals (Goran Jelisić and Ranko Češić) for crimes committed in Brčko and sentenced them to prison in faraway locations. This resulted in relativisation of war crimes and provided the ground for creating a fractured symbolic landscape that allowed each community to claim the victim status. This was reflected in the attitudes expressed by Brčko residents:

'Today, we are afraid to talk about what happened in Brčko because the truth may offend someone. On the other hand, being silent means denying ourselves the opportunity to move on.' (Bosniak, 37).

In opposition to international policies that discouraged public discussions about the conflict, war crimes and concentration camps, local actors formed various associations whose aims were to commemorate the civilian victims of war. Over the past couple of years, organisations such as the 'Association of Bosniak civilian victims of war', 'The Missing persons association,' and the 'Association of the concentration camp detainees' organised various activities to express their objection to the absence of meaningful reflection on the war period.

Every year, May marks the anniversary of the destruction of the Sava bridge and the beginning of the war crimes in Brčko, including the opening of the notorious Luka camp. The citizens place flowers on the bridge, organise peaceful 'remembrance walks,' and exhibit photos of the murdered civilians along the main pedestrian area.

Another step towards commemorating the war crimes was placing the memorial board and the opening of the memorial room inside the Luka camp as part of the broader initiative of the former detainees to memorialise the war crimes. The memorial board is placed right next to the board commemorating the

crimes committed in the same place during the Second World War. The representatives of the 'Association of the concentration camp detainees' stated that, even though the memorial room was open to the public, it was mostly foreign tourists who paid an occasional visit. It was their impression that no Serbs ever came to visit the memorial room.

Local Serb organisations also commemorate crimes against Serbs and display photos of people murdered by Bosniak forces in the nearby village of Bukvik. While these local initiatives might be perceived as a step towards reaching closure and starting the community healing process, the fact that civilian victim organisations are ethnically divided and only commemorate 'their' victims indicates low levels of recognition of mutual suffering. The 'Others' are always portrayed as aggressors and perpetrators of war crimes and therefore denied the status of victims.

Transforming the Symbolic Landscape: Monuments and Collective Memory

Monuments are an important part of national history and heritage that often represent the focal point of collective identity. They serve not only as reminders of past events but also of particular versions of those events, and in some cases, they represent materialisation of national myths. In this sense, a monument is an object that links the past with the present and is inscribed in the individual and collective memory. This type of monument is, by definition, neither neutral nor objective and openly serves political, national or religious ideologies.

The issue of memorialisation in Brčko District remains a contentious and symbolically charged element of post-conflict reconciliation. The presence of the 1996 monument "Serb Liberation of Brčko," commemorating Serb military victory, became a central obstacle to interethnic reconciliation due to its perceived glorification of wartime aggression. While the monument served as a cultural and political rallying point for the Serb community, it simultaneously provoked demands from Bosniak and Croat groups for the construction of their own commemorative sites.

In response to the impasse, the international supervisor, Raffi Gregorian, issued the 2009 Supervisory Order on Monuments. This directive legalised the existing Serb monument and mandated the construction of three new memorials: two honouring fallen soldiers of the ARBiH and HVO, and one dedicated to civilian victims of the conflict. The order emphasised the promotion of peace, tolerance, and multiethnic equality by situating the monuments within proximity in the city centre, symbolising co-existence amid past divisions. It also stipulated that all memorials should maintain political, national, ethnic, and religious neutrality. Despite this, the initiative paradoxically attempted to equate the commemoration of ethnonational military actors and their victims, thereby reflecting a complex effort to navigate competing narratives of victimhood and responsibility within the District.

While the Supervisor's intention was to grant each community a sense of contentment, the Order had the opposite effect and increased the frustration:

"So, they want to have three monuments—to all those different 'liberators' of Brčko and to all those victims that were killed during the 'liberation'. It's such a paradox—all those soldiers were actually liberating Brčko from each other." (Bosniak 54)

The monuments also have the task of testifying about the past and the meaning behind the monuments in the District can be found in their relation towards each other. The relation between the monument to the

Serb liberators of Brčko, the Croat defenders of Brčko and the Bosniak martyrs is that of negation, exclusion and contradiction. Achieving the military goal of either of these groups would mean the destruction and annihilation of other communities. Furthermore, the fact that the monument to civilian victims should contain no ethnic, national or religious references is an addition to the deliberate falsification of history. In an interview for the media, a local sociologist expressed his frustration and the long-lasting effects of such a decision:

“The fact is that the goal of the Serb liberators of Brčko was to liberate the city from all the non-Serb populations. Because of this liberating campaign, we obtained civilian victims. And these are the facts that they are trying to hide [...] the international community in Brčko is encouraging the strategy of forgetting the past and more importantly, forgetting the truth” (Pasalic, 2010).

According to his view, such a construct will gradually lead to distortion of facts and shape the ways that monuments will be interpreted in the future. He gives another example of what he labels ‘falsification of history’ in the case of the memorial board to 277 civilian victims discovered in the mass grave in Gorice. The site of the mass grave was marked and the memorial board stated:

“This is the place of Gorice, Brčko where in November 2006, a mass grave was discovered containing the skeleton remains of 277 Bosniaks and Croats killed during the 1992-1995 war.”

Stating that the victims found in the mass grave were ‘Bosniaks and Croats killed during the war’ hides the fact that the skeleton remains belonged to unarmed civilians, including women and children and therefore was not the result of conflict between armed groups, as suggested, but the result of ethnic cleansing. Pasalic (2010) warns that such distortion of historical facts would lead to the amnesty of war crimes and continue the vicious circle of hate and revenge. Encouraging such narratives shifts the District further away from reconciliation and neutrality and strengthens the sense of injustice and alienation from the image of an integrated multi-ethnic society.

It took 14 years to build the monument to civilian victims of war due to local opposition and requests to inscribe the names of the victims on the monument. The local discussions and opposition were ended by the Supervisor’s single-handed decision to build a monument without any names or ethnic and religious symbols. The monument was built in the shape of a single tear and revealed in February 2023.

The lack of common memorial sites in the post-conflict period indicates a deeper problem—the absence of shared historical truths. The lack of reference to war crimes and the specific type of memorialisation has only served to create more divisions and the perception that the idea of a neutral district is based on falsehood and denial.

This discourse has been reproduced through international intervention that opted for encouraging collective amnesia rather than establishing objective facts about the conflict. Such an approach contributed to fracturing historical interpretations and reinforcing nationalist narratives. Some respondents expressed a negative view of neutrality of Brčko District and the ban on ethnic and religious symbols:

“I think making the public sphere neutral is a good thing... the goal is to make everyone feel safe and comfortable.” But I’m not sure that these changes would have the desired effect because people feel like they are being denied their history and their identity. Furthermore, this makes them more extreme in their views.” (Serb 42).



According to these views, the neutrality that is forced on the citizens has the effect of reinforcing their focus on ethnic identities. This is in line with recent studies that have suggested that the identity-building component of the liberal peacebuilding model might have unintended negative effects on the sense of security of ethno-national communities recovering from conflict. (Kostic, 2007, p. 16) Confronted with a threat to their national identity, communities may be compelled to strengthen their ethno-national identities to fend off threats. The defence of ethnic identity in one group can trigger threat perceptions in others, increase tensions and ultimately lead to violence. In this sense, the strength of ethnic polarisation in Brčko District can be understood as an unintended consequence of the international peacebuilders' efforts to promote neutrality and reconciliation.

An example of such a strategy implemented in Brčko with the intention of promoting the District's uniqueness and its multi-ethnic character was organisation of public celebrations of the anniversary of Brčko District's establishment. The "Brčko District Day" (March 8) was announced as a public holiday in the district and marked with various cultural and sport activities as well as big concerts at the main square. Each year, the District Assembly approves the budget for organising these activities and invites famous regional bands and singers while maintaining the informal rule that all ethnonational groups are somewhat equally represented. This initiative aimed at bringing Brčko citizens together and instilling in them a sense of pride for being part of the Brčko community, regardless of their differences.

The citizens, however, expressed no emotional attachment to the district and felt that there was no much reason to celebrate. There seems to be no genuine praise for the District among its citizens, and the celebrations are perceived as phoney and insincere.

The District's 'Multi-Kulti' Identity: Divided We Stand

While the international emphasis on establishing the District as a neutral and multi-ethnic environment was portrayed as the ultimate goal of peacebuilding, gradually leading to reconciliation, the local actors repeatedly expressed the negative view of forced integration and multi-ethnicity. The District is often described as the 'multi-kulti capital of the country'. 'Multi-kulti' (short for multi-culture) is a term often used to mock the forced demands for the multi-ethnic environment at all levels of society in the District. It is very common to ridicule the idea of 'multi-kulti', and this was well reflected in the case of the arrest of two burglars who operated together, one Serb and one Bosniak. The local media reported about this case and labelled the couple as "Multi-kulti Bonnie and Clyde," saying that this was yet another example of the District's success—it achieved such levels of integration that Serbs and Bosniaks cooperated even in crime and robbed Serb and Bosniak houses equally.

The term reveals the local interpretation of internationally imposed ethnic quotas but also reflects on what is perceived as forced reconciliation:

'There is nothing genuine in this city.' The District is like a stage set by outsiders, and we are here to pretend and play our roles. We all smile when we are around each other, but I'm scared of what will happen once the curtain is down and no one is interested in watching our play'. (Bosniak 40)

The word that was repeatedly used in the context of international actors was 'dušebrižnici' which can be translated as 'soul saviours'. The term is used as a sarcastic reference to what is perceived as arrogance and unwanted interference on the side of external actors that claimed to know the only true path to peace (heaven). Many respondents expressed the sense of humiliation and frustration with the international



actors' approach that was perceived as 'reinventing the wheel'—promoting the same idea of 'brotherhood and unity' but without acknowledging their war traumas or allowing them to reach some degree of closure and healing. This is well illustrated in the following statements:

"What they are trying to build here is something that already existed before the war." It is like they are reinventing the wheel because different communities in Brčko lived together in peace long before the peacebuilding operations started" (Bosniak, 40).

Despite two decades of considerable international efforts to integrate public spaces and encourage everyday communication between the communities, the District remains divided and public spaces are informally segregated. Outside observers and occasional visitors might not be able to recognise the divisions or notice any visible war scars. The buildings in the city centre have been restored, and the pedestrian areas are green with many cafes and gardens around. The atmosphere is rather calm and relaxed, resembling any other small, peaceful town. A brief conversation with Brčko residents, however, depicts a different image and reveals divisions that might otherwise go unnoticed. While public institutions impose ethnic quotas and therefore create a multi-ethnic environment, the private sphere remains divided. Cultural and sport activities, cafes, and other spheres of citizens' everyday life continue to be dominated by ethnic narratives and estrangement:

"The city is divided. The cafes are informally divided. Officially, no one is banned from going to any cafe, but everyone knows where Serbs go out, which places are for Bosniaks, etc. "Reconciliation happened only on paper, it did not reach people's minds." (Bosniak, 26).

"I accept that we live in the same city and that we have to communicate but I will never invite them to my house." (Bosniak, 20)

All three communities in Brčko District adopted opposing narratives about the past and used them to justify the negative attitude towards the external regulation of the peacebuilding process. The local agency in shaping the peace process is apparent not only in open protests and rejection of international policies but also in the way local actors choose to interact with their neighbours, places, and ceremonies they visit, and therefore shape the sense of (not) belonging.

Conclusion

In recent years, scholars have come to recognise reconciliation as an important dimension of peacebuilding. The goal of reconciliation is to pursue changing identity, attitudes, and patterns of behaviour gradually leading to more cooperative relations. The underlying assumption is that inter-group communication, shared memory and open discussion are essential for achieving sustainable peace and preventing further conflict.

Reconciliation in Brčko District is often portrayed as a goal that has already been successfully achieved—a cherry on top that reaffirms the extent of international peacebuilding success. However, the fieldwork presented challenges to this narrative, suggesting that the portrayal of reconciliation as a completed process fails to reflect the realities of the District's citizens. International interventions that sought to alter the symbolic landscape—such as renaming streets and removing ethnic symbols—do not, in themselves, signify genuine reconciliation. The policy of neutrality, coupled with a 'collective amnesia' fostered by external



actors, obscures any meaningful engagement with the past or the validation of diverse identities and experiences. Brčko's outward appearance of ethnic neutrality does not equate to true reconciliation; rather, it masks the persistent divisions within the community.

This case study offers valuable insights into the nature of reconciliation in post-conflict societies and highlights the need to reexamine the dominant approaches. It emphasises the importance of fostering locally driven, citizen-based initiatives. Justice and open dialogue about war crimes, trauma, victims, and perpetrators are essential for achieving closure and initiating genuine healing. No external intervention or imposed policy can cause meaningful reconciliation without active local engagement. Effective reconciliation policies must be context-specific and rooted in local engagement, as no externally imposed solution can yield meaningful results without the active involvement of the communities it seeks to heal.



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