

# THE IMPACT OF INTERETHNIC CONTACTS ON THE POTENTIAL FOR OVERCOMING DIVISIONS IN POSTCONFLICT SOCIETIES

**(Kostovicova, Denisa (2023). *Reconciliation by Stealth: How People Talk about War Crimes*, Cornell University Press)**

---

UDK 316.644-057.874:323.1(048.83)	DOI 10.7251/DEFEN2454149E	COBISS.RS-ID 141351937
-----------------------------------	---------------------------	------------------------

---

**Stefan Elezović, Ma<sup>1</sup> of Sociology**

Denisa Kostovicova, a professor at the Institute of European Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science, is the author of the book “Reconciliation by Stealth: How People Talk about War Crimes.” The book is dedicated to “Those seeking justice after atrocities and those assisting in that search.” In this work, Kostovicova was interested in communication among members of different ethnic groups, going beyond just the violence in the former Yugoslavia. Specifically, the violence of the 1990s and the violence at the beginning of the 21st century in the former Yugoslavia inherited a narrative conflict, a verbal conflict of visions. Verbal confrontation is particularly evident when it comes to war crimes or suffering in the relatively recent past. Dominant ethnocentric public discourses have hindered and continue to hinder reconciliation. “Reconciliation by Stealth” is precisely the result of the author’s efforts to examine and verify the negative impact of public discourses on the process of interethnic reconciliation.

Denisa Kostovicova primarily analyzed transcripts of discussions organized by RECOM (Regional Commission for Establishing the Facts about War Crimes and Other Serious Violations of Human Rights Committed on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia from January 1, 1991, to December 31, 2001). RECOM represents a multi-ethnic civil society

---

1 PhD Candidate at the Faculty of political sciences, University of Banjaluka

initiative aimed at creating conditions for interethnic reconciliation and trust. The RECOM initiative is the result of collaboration among three non-governmental organizations from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. These organizations contacted people from different ethnic groups regarding issues related to endured mass atrocities. Ethnic groups in the Balkans generally highlight and exaggerate crimes committed by others while justifying their own misdeeds. Empathy towards fellow countrymen who suffered does not extend to members of other ethnicities; their suffering and victims, if acknowledged, are considered lesser. The mission of RECOM, as emphasized by the author, arose from the need to acknowledge the suffering of all victims in the region, opening a perspective for confronting the atrocities of the 1990s.

The mission of RECOM entailed a regional process of public consultations from 2006 to 2011. The goal of these consultations, held at various locations across the former Yugoslavia, encompassing regional, national, and local levels, was to identify an appropriate mechanism for addressing the violent past. Victims of violence from different ethnic groups participated in the consultations, totaling around 6,000 individuals from ethnic groups involved in the wars during the breakup of Yugoslavia. Throughout the RECOM discussions, the entire correspondence was documented. The author conducted a quantitative analysis of the content of transcripts from these discussions, combining it with her own fieldwork in the Balkans. This fieldwork included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observation of RECOM meetings, and other workshops. In all parts of the book, the author combines a qualitative and quantitative methodological approach. Unlike most scholars focusing on society, Kostovicova believes that ethnic identity, or its manifestations, holds positive potential for creating solidarity that transcends ethnic boundaries. “These discursive identity practices offset divisive identity politics and make way for reconciliation during deliberation about war crimes” (p. 5). In other words, Kostovicova analyzes the outcomes of the RECOM discussions, implicitly highlighting the essential importance of close contact or ongoing relationships among members of different ethnic groups.

Scientists, as highlighted by Kostovicova, often overlook an im-

portant, possibly crucial, element in the reconstruction of interethnic relations, and that is interethnic dialogue – direct and open contact among members of different ethnic groups. Interethnic relations are thus rebuilt “covertly” or “invisibly,” i.e., secretly, as suggested by the title of the book. The heightened significance of ethnic identity resulting from conflicts does not necessarily signify the elimination of correspondence with members of another ethnicity. On the contrary, interethnic interactions reveal the phenomenological dimension of suffering, the individual pain of victims wherein the perspective of achieving universal, human solidarity is unveiled. Confronted directly with the suffering of others, people understand the need for comfort, compensation, a form of retribution for what has been endured, lost, and experienced.

As the assumed framework for achieving reconciliation, Kostovicova introduces what she calls “transitional justice.” Transitional justice entails that “societies must explicitly address their legacy of violence” (Paige, A., 2009: 334; according to Kostovicova, 2023: 5-6). Kostovicova highlights this definition as a crucial and exclusive enduring link between postauthoritarian, postcommunist (political transitions), and postconflict transitions, i.e., transitions from a state of war to peacetime. Kostovicova, in fact, notes the negative impact of the quest for transitional justice. The pursuit of justice in postconflict societies often influences the further development of antagonisms among different ethnic groups, hindering reconciliation and an objective, respectful approach to the victims. Understanding the phenomenon of reconciliation itself requires acquainting ourselves with how people talk about war crimes in their efforts to seek justice. Kostovicova emphasizes that deliberately oriented discussions among members of conflicting ethnic groups about war crimes and their consequences are a prerequisite for achieving reconciliation. People in divided societies, while discussing the strategy of transitional justice, can come closer, even when their opinions differ.

In the first chapter of “Reconciliation by Stealth,” titled “War Crimes and Justice in the Balkans,” the author informs us about the fundamental ideas of RECOM, its advocates, as well as opponents of this project. The transitional justice process advocated by RECOM directly threatened the ethno-chauvinistic discourse that ensured the isolationism

of ethnicity and the nominal exclusivity of a group, thereby securing the practical dominance of national elites. RECOM questioned phenomena such as autovictimization, which are constant features of the ethnonationalistic narrative in the former Yugoslav republics. The basic idea of RECOM is the acknowledgment of all victims. Unambiguously, RECOM directly undermined the ethnonationalistic discourse that monopolized the interpretation of wartime history.

“Ethnic nationalism fueled the violence. This kind of nationalism refuses to tolerate ethnic Others within the national state. The ethnic mobilization that preceded the violence constructed the ethnic Other as an enemy. Consequently, ethnicity became ‘a matter of life or death.’ Nonetheless, the ethnic logic of violence does not mean that ethnicity was a cause of conflicts” (p. 19).

The traumatic legacy of interethnic conflicts has been instrumentalized to foster nationalist sentiments and strengthen the authority of national elites. Simultaneously, all attempts by political and civil organizations to create democratic alternatives to nationalist solutions, programs, policies, and visions have been devalued, sidelined, marginalized, and delegitimized. Among other things, the author acquaints us with specific efforts of non-governmental organizations to make strides in interethnic reconciliation, along with the negative reactions, challenges, and subversion by ethnonationalist elites. These elites deliberately interpreted efforts to achieve transitional justice as attempts to downplay, delegitimize, and dispute their own victims by the “Other.”

The second chapter, “Bringing identities into Postconflict Deliberation,” elucidates the concept of deliberation and explicates the nature of the relationship between deliberation and transitional justice. Kostovicova considers deliberation a suitable, efficient tool for eliminating bias against the ethnic Other. “Other regarding orientation of deliberation embodies the principles of reflexivity and reciprocity; deliberators reflect on their positions, weighing them in the light of counterarguments” (p. 36). Deliberation is also oriented towards the common good, thus surpassing primarily discriminatory ethnocentric logic. In this chapter, the author touches upon various perspectives of different authors related to deliberation in divided societies and informs us about relevant examples

of deliberative experiments. Through these examples, one can assess the character, significance, and necessity of deliberation in a postconflict environment. “When people die or suffer in war because of their ethnic identity, wartime injury becomes a symbol of that identity” (p. 41). In postconflict societies, intragroup (ethnic) solidarity, solidified by war suffering, is contrasted with forms of solidarity that transcend it.

The title of the third chapter is “Quantifying Discourse in Transitional Justice.” In this chapter, the tools of quantification, or the measurement methods used to determine the deliberativeness of discourse in postconflict societies, are discussed. The Discourse Quality Index (DQI) was employed to study reconciliation and transitional justice. This index is commonly used to assess the effectiveness, clarity, and relevance of communication within a specific context. Content analysis reveals formal ways in which people interact with members of other groups (other discourses) during deliberation. In the fourth chapter, titled “Words of Reason and Talk of Pain,” Kostovicova seeks to draw conclusions about the quality of deliberation on war crimes. It has been shown that actors are significantly more inclined to express empathy towards the Other if the suffering of the other is conveyed as personal, individual suffering. Similarly, concerning gender, it is demonstrated that women have a greater capacity for deliberation, as they are, among other things, significantly more empathetic compared to men.

“The title of the fifth chapter is ‘Who Agrees and Who Disagrees.’ In this chapter, the author introduces us to the concept of interactivity. ‘Interactivity reflects both the behavioral and content dimensions of discourse’ (p. 90). Rebuilding ethnic relations through deliberation in divided, postconflict societies necessarily relies on decency in communication exchange. Respecting the interlocutor in communication is equivalent to respecting their name, origin, position, opinion, and identity. Based on the coding of speech acts in RECOM, higher interactivity across ethnic boundaries was observed compared to within the confines of one’s own group. From the data obtained, the author concluded that people have a willingness to interact with members of other ethnic communities on the topic of addressing issues related to war crimes and the legacy of a troubled past. Research confirms that people choose politically simi-

lar partners for discussion. Regarding the nature of interactivity, even in cases of complete disagreement or opposing views, members of different ethnic groups are involved in the interactive process. The existence of normative assumptions enabling such involvement constitutes a necessary foundation for improving interethnic relations.”

“The title of the sixth chapter of the book ‘Reconciliation by Stealth’ is ‘Discursive Solidarity Against Identity Politics.’ In this chapter, the author sheds light on the effect of people expressing their ethnic identities on the goals of deliberation. Deliberation involves expressing ethnic identity in a respectful, honorable manner that accepts the Other. Postconflict societies in the Balkans have materialized as predominantly ethnically homogeneous spaces. Cases of efforts to intensify or deepen interethnic contact by states have dwindled. Similar actions are mostly the result of non-governmental organizations and civil initiatives. “Both organizers and participants in the RECOM consultations were aware of the perils of politicized ethnic identity. The process was thought to be ‘contaminated’ by an ‘identitarian nightmare’ characteristic of the politics of Balkan states which participants came” (p. 111). All those who, according to Kostovicova, are part of ethnic discourse were aware of the danger of becoming outcasts due to maintaining and establishing solidarity with members of another ethnic group or other groups.”

“Marginalization of victims by their coethnics was another important axis for affective alignment with victims from other ethnic groups, who were also recognized as being denigrated in their own communities. As one participant put it: ‘It is crucial that I can see here that there is no principle of ethnic belonging. There are two categories: one is a category of a perpetrator, and the other of equality of all victims who need to be helped’ (p. 120).

“Reconciliation by Stealth” is a work that does not delve into the causes of ethnic divisions; however, it provides a solid portrayal of civil initiative and its implications. It represents a significant step in creating favorable conditions for confronting the legacy of war crimes. Through the RECOM project, a crucial component of interethnic reconciliation is examined, often overlooked by scholars dealing with interethnic relations, especially in terms of establishing conditions for mutual trust.

Denisa Kostovicova, by delving into the content of RECOM consultations, investigates the effects, consequences, and results of the analyzed discussions to arrive at an objective assessment of the relevance and significance of the impact of interethnic correspondence on interethnic appreciation, respect, and, ultimately, unbiased confrontation with the legacy of war crimes in the former Yugoslav state. Deliberation also plays a crucial role in achieving interethnic reconciliation. The conclusion is that deliberation can be part of the conflict resolution. People from different ethnic groups engaging in discussions can foster solidarity that transcends ethnicity. When addressing the issue of war crimes and war trauma for successful realization, it is essential to consider within discussions beyond identity issues. The goal is to condemn the criminal act. This book reveals a serious potential for interethnic reconciliation. At the same time, Denisa Kostovicova, through this work, provides a testimony of the endeavor undertaken for the sake of building peace in the Balkans.”