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The anniversary of Srebrenica massacre: superficial reconciliation in the Balkans

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11 July saw the 20th anniversary of the crime in Srebrenica, where the Bosnian Serb army killed about 8000 Bosnian Muslims. They took shelter in a 'safe area' set up by the UN in 1993, which was protected by a battalion of Dutch peacekeepers. The massacre was carried out with the passive attitude of the Dutch.

The ceremony in Srebrenica was attended by, among others, the Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić, who was pelted with stones. Vučić's presence was controversial because during the war he called for the persecution of Bosnian Muslims, and even in 2008 was one of the defenders of Gen. Ratko Mladić, who was responsible for the crimes in Srebrenica.

The Serbian Prime Minister's visit to Srebrenica, as well as the symbolic gestures from the political elites of other countries in the region, was intended to strengthen their position on the international stage, but it is difficult to say that the move was a sign of progress in the reconciliation process. Under pressure from the EU, the leaders of Serbia, Croatia, Albania and Bosnia have declared their goodwill and have often made such symbolic gestures, but there is no political will in these countries to investigate and settle war crimes, or to bring those who committed them to account. The elites of the individual nations focus on their own commemoration of their victims and war heroes, who in neighbouring countries are often considered war criminals, something which perpetuates the divisions. Individual countries are more interested in promoting their own narrative of the conflicts in the region than in the process of reconciliation.

Incident during the ceremony in Srebrenica

Representatives of Serbia, which supported the Bosnian Serbs during the war and is considered to share responsibility for this crime, have repeatedly visited Srebrenica. The previous president Boris Tadić came twice, in 2005 and 2010, but the presence of Alexander Vučić, however, was particularly controversial because during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina he was an activist of the extreme nationalist party, and openly called for fighting and killing Muslims. Moreover, in the period preceding the anniversary of the massacre, the Serbian government and Prime Minister Vučić himself sharply criticised Britain's proposed UN resolution to commemorate the genocide of 1995. It was eventually rejected thanks to the veto of Russia, which took the opportunity to reinforce its image as defenders of Serbian interests on the international stage. In addition, in June Naser Oric, who commanded the Bosnian troops in Srebrenica and whom Belgrade accuses of war

crimes, was detained in Switzerland under a Serbian arrest warrant. In this context, Vučić's visit was a symbolic gesture that was meant to shaping Belgrade's image as a party striving for reconciliation, the more so as the Prime Minister himself did not address either his activity in extreme nationalist groupings or his long-term defence of Gen. Mladić in any way. Paradoxically, the incident in Srebrenica strengthened the positive perception of the Serbian Prime Minister on the international stage, painting the Bosnian side in a bad light, as a rowdy prank became equated with a lack of desire for any reconciliation.

Reconciliation, but on their own terms

The Serbian governments have been pursuing a two-pronged strategy with regard to the crimes committed by Serbs during the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Under pressure from the international community they are cooperating with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), representatives of the Serbian elite have repeatedly apologised for the crimes committed, and in 2010 the Serbian parliament passed a resolution condemning the massacre in Srebrenica (although the currently ruling SNS party did not participate in the vote). On the other hand, however, it has not taken any significant action to settle the war crimes, and any calls for their resolution and the prosecution of those responsible (whom much of the population treats as heroes) are regarded as a betrayal of national interests. The authorities tolerate the relativisation and even the open questioning of the war crimes committed by Serbs in the nineties. In particular, they strongly oppose the naming of the crime in Srebrenica as genocide, even though the ICTY has deemed this term to be reasonable. In its policy of memory, the authorities in Belgrade focus on crimes committed against Serbs, including during World War II, suggesting a close causal relationship with their policies in the 1990s. The resolution and investigation of war crimes are treated as threats to national identity, as well as to the stability of the whole region. On the other hand, symbolic gestures and rhetoric appeals to focus on the future prevail in Serbia's relations with the neighbouring countries.

Struggle for memory

Serbia's attempts to relativise the war crimes committed during the armed conflict in the 1990s are not an isolated phenomenon. A similar policy is being carried out in all the countries that took part in the fighting. They commemorate their own sacrifices, and honour their heroes – whom their neighbours consider as war criminals – thereby negating the criminality of the activities of their own nation's representatives. Attempts to account for war crimes are blocked, an example of which is the prevention in the parliament of Kosovo – despite EU and US pressure – of the establishment of a special tribunal which was intended to resolve the war crimes committed by Albanians. The spirit of strengthening national narratives will probably be reinforced by the celebrations scheduled in August commemorating the 20th anniversary of Operation Storm, which restored Croatian control over part of its territory, but was associated with the exodus of some 200,000 Serbs. As a result, in the near future we should expect a strengthening of the divisions in the region, rather than any progress in the process of reconciliation. The initiatives by non-governmental sectors to resolve war crimes, which are mostly ignored, will not change this.