Srebrenica: Between denial and recognition

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In 2005, ten years after the Srebrenica massacre, a group of Serbian NGOs published a declaration calling for official Serbian recognition of the rights of victims of Serbian war crimes. Introducing the declaration, Obrad Savic describes "the organized denial of crimes in Serbia", and "the arrogant self-justification of the collective massacre in Srebrenica" that prompted its publication.

Eurozine’s decision to post on its website the full text of the “Declaration on the obligation of the state of Serbia...” issued by eight non-governmental organizations from Belgrade (NGO G-8), represents important international recognition of our joint efforts to uncover and publicly disclose the truth about mass crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the massacre in Srebrenica, it is our primary political and moral obligation to take a clear stand against the terrifying proportions of the crime, and the magnitude of catastrophe caused and committed by the Serbian side.

Today it is clear that denial of the criminal past leads only to the extension of international exclusion and internal agony in all parts of the former Yugoslavia, especially in Serbia and Montenegro. The process of dealing openly and unambiguously with collective responsibility represents an essential precondition for the renewal of moral sovereignty, without which Serbia and Montenegro will be able to regain neither its political reputation nor its international dignity.

The genocide in Srebrenica, and the Memorial Centre in Potocari, which was built as a permanent reminder of the mass horrors that took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina, have become the decisive measure of our own self-corrective confrontation with our criminal past.

To be able to understand the causal genesis of the “Declaration”, which has been submitted to the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, one must bear in mind the circumstances surrounding the organized denial of crimes in Serbia, and even worse – the arrogant self-justification of the collective massacre in Srebrenica. The strategy of shameful denial of war crimes committed by the Serbian side has been at the heart of our
longstanding inability to face, in a responsible way, the horrors of our immediate past. For a long time, the political community has lived under a taboo, crucified between its guilt, shame, and loyalty. Political inertia and moral stupor are just the symptoms of a failed liberation from a chilling past, one that has deprived numerous generations in Serbia and Montenegro of their self-esteem. The Serbian state and society have been reluctant to accept that the process of building democracy after the fall of Milosevic is inseparably linked to the public reflection on Serbian guilt.

In an extreme form of denial of one’s own criminal past, the horrific crimes committed during armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia have been buried by silence, and in silence. In response to this shameful silence, our network of non-governmental organizations has been forced to venture into unfair and often risky public polemics on the organized and state-run concealment of facts, and on self-deception and outright lying. We have exerted pressure on the Serbian government, politicians, state officials, and the general public to initiate a long-postponed process of confrontation with a traumatic past filled with injustices and lies. Sporadic fissures in the wall of ashamed but conscious suppression of guilt would surface uncontrollably here and there, just like the sunken trucks that carried the bodies of dead Albanian civilians that would now and then be pulled out of the Danube. But retribution for our criminal reality has been merciless: the emotionally vulnerable community of Serbia and Montenegro has begun to face up to the facts of its criminal past.

By the middle of 2005, almost half of Serbia’s population is ready to accept the idea that war crimes suspects must be put on trial, although suspicion and distrust in institutions and mechanisms of international justice (embodied in the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia – ICTY) is still widespread. But the awareness of institutional responsibility for war crimes is still extremely low: the majority of citizens in Serbia and Montenegro are not yet ready to face the fact that the Serbian state – the sole guardian of the law – could have perpetrated such monstrous crimes.

Despite numerous obstacles, the awareness of collective responsibility has been gradually increasing. The broadcast of documentary footage in June 2005 (shown on several TV channels throughout Serbia, including the national television), showing the slaughter of six Muslim civilians by Serbian police forces near Srebrenica, significantly contributed to breaking down the last taboo protecting the Serbian public and preventing it from understanding the full scale of crimes which had been committed. These crimes were committed not only in our names – but committed by us. After the public viewing of the footage about the Srebrenica tragedy, collective self-deception, which has helped the Serbs to style themselves as innocent victims, was finally shattered. It is precisely this footage that initiated the avalanche of questions challenging the fundamental nationalistic consensus of the Serbian state and society. A thorough, conclusive discussion on political, legal, and moral self-cognizance of Serbian society could wait no longer.

At about the same time, only a few days before the broadcast of the video, the long-prepared “Declaration” was handed over to the Serbian Assembly. Although the content of the “Declaration” was the result of a collective endeavour, I would like to emphasize that professor Nenad Dimitrijevic, surely one the greatest experts in matters of transitional justice in the former Yugoslavia, provided the most competent political and
legal argumentation. In line with our initial expectations, the “Declaration” caused immediate panic among Serbian political elites. For alleged procedural reasons, the “Declaration” was rejected; meanwhile, the members of the Parliament proved incapable of drafting an official declaration whose main purpose would be to condemn the war crime committed in Srebrenica. Once again, the lack of political will and moral resoluteness compromised the whole state of Serbia. Although from the very beginning we were all aware that the nationalistic past cannot be “cleansed”, and that the normality of the nation could not be restored, we demanded that the state take a clear legal stand against all criminal institutions it inherited after the fall of Milosevic.

A response to the failure of the Assembly to reach a consensus on the official declaration on the genocide in Srebrenica was the result of a bizarre hyper-inflation of declarations. In June 2005, all relevant political parties, organizations, and institutions in Serbia offered their own political version of the “Declaration”. There was an irresponsible and inappropriate outburst of various declarations aimed at the ultimate neutralization of the Srebrenica massacre, which would eventually lead to shameful equation of all crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia. It seemed as if we were entering the second phase of the national policy of denying a criminal past.

Unlike the Serbian Assembly, which still dares to demonstrate perverse casualness towards moral mortgages of the shameful past, the Council of Ministers of Serbia and Montenegro firmly and decisively condemned the Srebrenica crime. These are politicians who boldly confronted the nationalists involved in ethnic cleansing, crimes which once again earned Serbia international contempt. But the nationalist lobby of Serbia was not yet ready to strip the war crimes suspects of their cheap mask of national pride.

The “Srebrenica Resolution - Call for Remembrance”, passed by the US Senate, as well as the “Srebrenica Resolution” adopted by the EU, should be read as a clear political message. The world community is united in its condemnation of the Srebrenica genocide: after the American and European resolutions, it is naive to believe that the truth about this crime would remain hidden. It is particularly irresponsible for us to hope we can elude responsibility for the logical consequences of a state-sponsored crime. Legal, political, and historical justice can only be fulfilled on the condition that we follow consistently the universal principle expressed by Hannah Arendt: “The Nazis were not tried for having committed crimes against the Jewish people, but for crimes against humanity committed against the Jews.”

Finally, I would like to emphasize that all relevant information about the Srebrenica crime (from the video and billboards displayed around the cities in Serbia, to books, journals, texts, and declarations) sprang from this courageous endeavour on the part of G-8. Thus, it is not remotely surprising that a few days ago the director of the Security and Information Agency (BIA) publicly announced that “the police are following closely the work of several non-governmental organizations in Serbia”. These threats will not cause us to have second thoughts. We will continue to warn the public that any flexibility towards war criminals is charged with the potential for the wheel of horror to once again be set in motion.

Belgrade, 7 July 2005