



BACKGROUND PAPER – Dr Ioannis Armakolas, CRIC & University of Macedonia

‘Reconstructing cultural heritage in Bosnia: The case of the Slana Banja memorial complex in Tuzla’

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Introduction: What was at stake in the Bosnian war?

Among heritage experts the Bosnian war is well known for the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage. My paper today will rather focus on cultural heritage construction and reconstruction and how it might be implicated in the imagining of a new, more inclusive and less ethnic nationalist Bosnia. The case I will present is that of the city of Tuzla and in particular the memorial complex of Slana Banja

Let me first start with a few words about what was at stake in the Bosnian war. A tradition of relative peaceful co-existence was undermined by the nationalist parties after the first multi-party elections in Bosnia in 1990. The country was then brutally destroyed through ethnic cleansing mainly by Bosnian Serb forces and to a lesser extent by all the military forces involved in the Bosnian war. But inter-ethnic co-existence was not attacked only on the battlefields. That was only the most visible competition between moderates and ethnic nationalists. From the start of the war a fierce competition started within the Sarajevo government controlled areas for the nature of the Bosnian Muslim nation, the concept of the new state, the actual future of inter-ethnic and communal relations in Bosnia. A delicate balance between the more moderate conceptions of Bosnia advancing inter-ethnic co-existence and unity and the radical nationalist conceptions which promoted the idea of ethnic exclusivity, homogeneity and ethnic division was maintained. The objective of an increasingly powerful group within the Bosnian Muslim elites was the full control of Bosnian politics and the political homogenization of Muslims in anticipation of the division of Bosnia along ethnic lines. Progressive and liberal Bosnians had to oppose not only the aggressive nationalism of Bosnian Serbs and Croats, but also the ‘soft’ destruction of the spirit of inter-ethnic co-existence by the Bosnia Muslim ethnic nationalists.

What is Tuzla and why was it important?

Tuzla's role in that picture was very important. Tuzla is one of the biggest Bosnian cities; in 1991 it had a mixed population of about one hundred and thirty thousand inhabitants (131,618), made up of (47.61%) Muslims, (15.50%) Croats, (15.40%) Serbs, (16.71%) Yugoslavs, and two dozen other smaller groups (4.78%). The city is one of the largest and oldest industrial centres of Bosnia, with a long tradition of socialist and working class activism. Tuzla was in the 1990 elections, which were the last before the war, one of only two municipalities in which leftist non-nationalists won power. The Tuzla non-nationalist government outlived the war and remains in power to this date. During the war the Tuzla leadership attempted to formulate a civic-moderate political alternative and actively opposed the nationalist policies dominant elsewhere in the country. Furthermore, Tuzla was important because during the war it faced strong opposition, subversion and constant political attack by Bosnian Muslim radical nationalists. Finally, Tuzla was a city in which the persecution of minorities was prevented, and, despite the existing social pressure, non-Muslims felt more or less secure. In fact, the city maintained throughout the war an international reputation for being a place where reason and civility survived, and where the worst effects of war were prevented.

Reimagining Bosnia in wartime Tuzla

Indeed the political elites of Tuzla formulated a new vision for a more civic and less ethnic Bosnia. They stressed civic aspects of Bosnian identity over ethnic ones. They downplayed those features, including religion, that divide the Bosnian peoples. They resisted the division of Bosnia into ethnic statelets and generally they formulated a middle-way ideology, between what was the socialist regime and the Bosnian Muslim ethnic nationalism. This ideology became the nucleus of the more inclusive discourse, which later became popular also among formerly ethnic nationalists. Alongside, the Tuzla political elites reformulated local identity in a post-Yugoslav and pro-Bosnian manner and revitalised Tuzla pride and patriotism, which were directly connected to tolerance, inter-ethnic unity and the legacy of antifascism. Finally, especially after the war, the Tuzla political elites embarked in a radical revamp of the image of the city. Gradually Tuzla is losing its old image of a city of mining and dirty industry. The local authorities are investing in the services sector and culture. In the place of a 'Yugonostalgic' grey industrial city the current mayor wants Tuzla to be viewed as a city of culture and as 'Bosnia at its best'.

The Slana Banja memorial complex

Let me now provide some background information on the Slana Banja memorial complex. The memorial complex is located in the middle part of the urban complex and less than half-kilometre away from the city's centre-point. The memorial complex hosts numerous larger and smaller memorials and heritage objects. The wider area of the complex consists largely of unbuilt space of greenery and forest. Located on the slopes of the Gradina hill, the complex also has an amphitheatric shape overlooking part of the urban complex. It was built in socialist times, initially as a memorial cemetery to fallen Second World War partisans. It was later expanded to cover a large area and enriched with dozens of smaller and larger memorials. From its inception the memorial complex was

inextricably linked on the one hand with ideological references and historical interpretations of the socialist regime and on the other hand with the performative aspects of the regime ideology. The Slana Banja complex became the main site for the commemorations and anniversaries of the socialist regime. With the collapse of Yugoslavia, the independence of Bosnia and the war, the role of the memorial complex was questioned, together with the entire legacy of the socialist regime. Independent Bosnia was defended mainly by the ethnic nationalist Bosnian Muslim elites. These were at best ambivalent and at worst entirely negative towards the socialist regime and its heritage. The Tuzla governing elites were formally successors of the Communist Party but they still had to adjust their politics and ideological references to the new Bosnian reality. It took Tuzla political elites quite some time to formulate their post-Yugoslav vision of Bosnia and adjust their understanding of cultural heritage in the city to that. For most of the war period, the socialist heritage of Slana Banja remained more or less in limbo. Only after the war, a clear vision of how the socialist heritage of Slana Banja would be linked to the discourses of independent Bosnia emerged.

The turning point: the burial of the victims of the *Kapija* massacre of 25 May 1995

The turning point for the transformation of the Slana Banja memorial complex came on 25 May 1995, six months before the end of the war, when Tuzla experienced its worst tragedy. A single artillery round from Serb positions killed 71 mostly young civilians and wounded 124 others in the city centre's pedestrian area. It was the largest civilian tragedy of the Bosnian war. The *Kapija* massacre hit the core of the local community. Its members to this day single out this event as the biggest tragedy, the most traumatic event that has befallen Tuzla. The death of youngsters remained engrained in the memory of the local community.

The local authorities, in their effort to keep the local community united in this difficult moment, decided to bury all victims, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, together in a common burial site at the area of the memorial complex. In this they defied the official Islamic institutions and Mustafa Cerić, the highest authority of the Islamic Community in Bosnia, who spoke against the 'sinful' joint burying of victims of different religions. They also opposed radical nationalist politicians and intellectuals who objected to this 'unification' of the killed youth and who, with aggressive verbal attacks, condemned the local authorities and the parents who accepted the joint burial site. Making a point against ethnic division and nationalism, at the worst moment in Tuzla's wartime history they went ahead with their plans to bury those killed together. The common funeral took place during the night for fear of new artillery attacks. At the funeral, a key local politician spoke such: "Together, you will rest in peace. On the hill, which offers a view of your city, on Slana Banja, where many of you – strolling with your parents – made your first steps in life, will be your eternal home". The public attacks by religious conservatives and radical nationalists continued also after the war, but the local authorities, the families of the deceased and the various civic groups remained adamant in their opposition to ethnic division and nationalism. Both during and after the war the burial site became the locus of spontaneous popular commemorations and anti-nationalist activism.

The Slana Banja memorial complex after the 1992-1995 war

After the war, successive interventions expanded, reconstructed and revamped the memorial complex. The initial burial site of the killed youngsters was made into a memorial cemetery. The graves of the

youngsters remained gathered in one place and bearing no religious symbols other than on a small silver medal under the photos of the deceased person. The families were given the choice to use also non-religious engravings in these silver medals. New memorials were also built: a memorial to the fallen soldiers of Tuzla in the 1992-95 war and a memorial to fallen decorated soldiers. The memorial cemetery and the memorial to the fallen soldiers were the top post-war priority and became the first two interventions in the area. The May 1995 massacre was and still is the local community's most traumatic moment in recent history. The construction of the memorial cemetery was a necessary step in the local community's healing process. Similarly, the memorial to the more than eight hundred killed soldiers was necessary for the healing process of their families as well as a patriotic duty of the city and its political leaders.

After these two interventions, reconstruction in the complex diversified. In time, the partisan monuments started being renovated to reverse the effects of neglect and vandalism. Given the limited resources, priority was given to only some of them. An important intervention pointing to the new appreciation of the heritage of the socialist regime was the construction of a new memorial space – called 'Alley of Heroes' – in which many of the busts of partisan and socialist regime heroes were placed. To construct a new partisan memorial in post-socialist Bosnia was a symbolically significant event, even more so since the new space became a refuge for neglected and vandalised partisan heritage. The busts were brought to the spot from different warehouses where they had been stored since the start of the war for protection from vandalism and destruction. Even the creation of new busts honouring recently deceased socialist regime heroes was commissioned while the 'Alley of Heroes' became also the resting place for a bust of a partisan hero of Serb national background which was vandalised and removed from a neighbouring municipality. The 'Alley of Heroes' soon became a place of informal inter-generational transmission of meaning and knowledge about the socialist regime. In addition to the heritage sites, the memorial complex was in recent years revamped becoming a very pleasant environment for the recreation of Tuzla citizens and visitors.

Changes and their significance: Meaning and commemorative practice

I will now make some observations regarding the reconstruction of the memorial complex before in the end I turn my attention to the issue of reimagining Bosnia. The observations relate to issues of meaning and ideology, of agency and commemorative practices, and of physical properties of the objects and spatial organisation.

- Meaning creation in the Slana Banja memorial complex reflected the official ideology and the re-interpretation of the past that gradually formulated in Tuzla after the independence of Bosnia. The memorial complex created a tangible and visual representation of the official discourse of Tuzla polity. The Tuzla discourse formulates a linear narrative connecting the 1992-1995 war for the defence of Bosnia with the antifascist struggle of the Second World War. The reconstructed complex created a visual link between the Second World War and the 1992-1995 war.
- The Slana Banja complex can be contrasted with the dominant trends of war commemoration in Bosnia. The complex became a heritage site where a more inclusive and less ethnically determined historical interpretation can emerge. Non-ethnic heritage and meaning is prioritised. Civic aspects of nationalism, which are in principle at least more inclusive, are prioritised over the divisive ethnic nationalism. Historical periods that can potentially function as common sources of identity are given significant space. Secular aspects of heritage are also given importance and

religious references in the complex are much less pronounced. This contrasts with the precedence of religious symbolism that is a standard feature in virtually all other war commemoration sites in Bosnia.

- The routinised practices of official commemoration and anniversary marking in Slana Banja quickly became a standard feature of social life in Tuzla. Several times in a year the complex becomes the location where the official Tuzla political discourse and historical interpretation is repeated through speech and commemorative practice. The post-communist local authorities continue the legacy of their socialist predecessors only with altered meanings.
- These officially sponsored anniversaries are attended by few people; mainly representatives of authorities and civil society. This is contrasted to the massive participation of the local community in the yearly official commemoration of the 71 killed youngsters. The spontaneous participation of the local community has in practice made the memorial civilian cemetery the centre-point of the memorial complex. As a consequence also the civilian memorial, which, it is reminded, is non-ethnic and non-religious, maintains the symbolic precedence over other heritage and memorial objects in the complex and the city at large. This again contrasts with the practice in the rest of the country where war memorials are central to the post-war commemoration practices. This is the case even in Sarajevo despite the well-known tragic fate of civilians under the Bosnian Serb siege.
- Another issue regards the mixed usage of the area as both memorial complex and a park. This choice undoubtedly has contributed to the attractiveness of the area among city dwellers, especially youngsters, and has aided their familiarisation with the city's history. However the side effect has been the creation of new disputes since recreation and commemoration are not always easy to reconcile. For example, families of fallen soldiers purport that the unregulated recreation in and near the memorials is disrespectful to the memory of those commemorated in the complex. Also a heritage expert expressed his dissatisfaction with having a cemetery located in an area where families visit for relaxation.

Conclusions: The Tuzla innovations and the challenges ahead

I would like now to close with some conclusions regarding the issues connected to the process of reimagining a less nationalist and more inclusive Bosnia through heritage reconstruction in Tuzla.

- Tuzla became the pioneer in developing and promoting ideas that were later spread and became successful in Sarajevo and the other parts of the country with a Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) majority. This was initially connected to ideas about nation, state and community and pointed towards the promotion of inclusive politics and civic nationalism in the place of ethnic nationalism and religious radicalism. But Tuzla pioneered also in developing visions on how these ideas could be connected to heritage construction and reconstruction. This is not uncommon in post-war Bosnia (e.g. Mostar) but only in Tuzla were these initiated and implemented in their entirety by local actors (political authorities and civil society) without the involvement of the international community.
- The Tuzla discourse and heritage construction created a symbolic space for the survival, transformation and re-invigoration of the political legacy of the socialist regime. Today, two

decades after the fateful 1990 elections, the former communist SDP is the largest party in Bosniak areas and enjoys the support of the international community.

- The new meaning produced in the Slana Banja memorial complex, in accordance with the official Tuzla discourse, is less monolithic than the one of the socialist regime and more inclusive than the one promoted by ethnic nationalists in the country, but it is still based on significant exclusions and silences. The meaning of the partisan struggle in the Second World War is transformed to fit the new dominant discourses. It is connected to anti-fascism and the Bosnian tradition of co-existence, while in fact the partisan struggle was inextricably linked to the socialist ideology, the vision for the creation of a strong Yugoslavia, the unity of the Yugoslav peoples. The new meaning also over-emphasises the Second World War, and seriously underplays the subsequent Yugoslav period. In accordance to the dominant ideology of independent Bosnia, successes and strengths are discursively linked to characteristics of the Bosnian society while the positive influence of the Yugoslav period and the cross-border links created during this period are played down.
- The limitations of the inclusive new meaning are also becoming obvious. The Tuzla-promoted ideas are less ethnically oriented and more inclusive but do not fully bridge the divisions created during the 1992-1995 war. The Tuzla discourse and the Slana Banja memorial complex provide space for identification to pro-Bosnian Serbs and Croats and to secular, liberal and anti-nationalist Bosniaks, but they remain alien to the more conservative, ethnic nationalist and religion-oriented Bosniaks. Interestingly, a recently constructed memorial to decorated soldiers of the Bosnian Army may contribute to bridging the gap with that group of more conservative Bosniaks. Heritage construction and reconstruction is again used for re-formulating identities and bridging political divides.
- However other important challenges from war-created cleavages remain. The Tuzla-promoted discourse cannot fully incorporate the political identities of Serbs who opposed the independence of Bosnia and found themselves physically or emotionally on the side of the Bosnian Serb forces during the war. Similar is the case of those Croats who identified during the war with Herceg-Bosna, the Bosnian Croat breakaway statelet. New ideas on how to address these divisions have to be conceived. Especially as the post-2006 crisis in Bosnia deepens, moderate politics, if they are to be effective ways forward will have to be found to accommodate all sides of the political and ethnic spectrum, including those more attuned to the ethnic political agenda.
- A good case in hand is the annual anniversary of the 15 May 1992 incident of Brcanska Malta, in which many young Yugoslav Army conscripts were killed in an exchange of fire with Tuzla defence forces while withdrawing from the city. The Tuzla authorities were among the first to allow commemorations on location by former 'enemy' groups, but they still need to devise new inclusive ways for the commemoration of this event and for its memorialisation. Heritage construction and reconstruction may again prove an important tool for this reconciliation. A major challenge for Tuzla authorities' moderate and reconciliatory politics may possibly be to find the *modus vivendi* for a future memorial that will incorporate all the victims of the Brcanska Malta tragedy, including the Yugoslav Army conscripts.

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