Grassroots involvement in conflict transformation is key to overcoming the prejudice and mistrust that lies at the centre of many of the current problems facing the southern Balkans.

By Spyros Sofos

Two decades after the onset of Yugoslavia’s disintegration, the aftershocks are still affecting the Balkans. Kosova/o’s independence declaration, the ensuing Serbian ire and the reluctance of Greece to recognise it, the new round of inconclusive talks between Macedonia and Greece are just the visible aspects of a much broader conflict-ridden landscape.

These disputes are perceived as aspects of intractable conflicts: Kosovar Albanians, victims of Serbian prejudice and repression are not prepared to take seriously Serbian perspectives on the future of Kosovo. Serbs, oblivious to the stark reality of demography on the ground, consider Kosovo an inalienable part of their national territory and the sacred birthplace of their nation and are equally insensitive to Kosovar Albanian voices calling for independence. The assertion of the sovereignty of a Macedonian nation over the territory of the Republic of Macedonia faces competing claims advocating the autonomy of the country’s Albanian community. It also meets a powerful challenge by Greek nationalist discourse claiming ownership of names and symbols that Macedonian nationalism has also constructed as elements of Macedonian nationhood.

The international community has attempted to engage the leaderships of the countries and communities involved in these disputes in order to secure viable solutions. In Macedonia, international mediation averted the escalation of the six-month violent intercommunal conflict between the Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) and the Macedonian army and security forces. Through negotiations and the services of EU and US mediation the opposing parties
concluded the Ochrid agreement of 2001 which envisaged a package of wide-ranging amendments to the constitution and legislative changes that effectively recognized Macedonian-Albanians as stakeholders in the young state.

In Kosovo, the 1999 NATO intervention, the administration of the province by the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), the declaration of what is in practice limited independence for the young Republic of Kosova, coupled with an unprecedented yet slowly declining EU institutional and overseeing presence there, have been hailed as the only viable way to address the decades of mistrust and conflict that have marred Serbian/Kosovar relations.

Finally, the dispute between Macedonia and Greece regarding the former’s name has been the subject of international mediation for the past eighteen years without any substantial progress.

Most attempts to engage with these disputes have been based on traditional Track I diplomacy, that is, negotiations and solution frameworks handled by government officials and politicians. The examples of Rambouillet, Dayton, Ohrid, the UN-sponsored Greek-Macedonian negotiations make it clear that, for a host of reasons, this reliance to Track I diplomacy has proved not to yield the desired results. The preferred solutions of government-controlled diplomacy have involved governments or community élites. Their intergovernmental and consociational character has left the societies and communities which have to live with the decisions reached excluded from the process of conflict resolution. And as the emphasis in Track I diplomacy is put on establishing a ‘negative’ peace (i.e. lack of hostilities) and promoting coercive peacemaking, not enough energy has been directed at more important aspects of the Balkan conflicts.

Having said that, alternative approaches to peace, cooperation and reconciliation in the Balkans do exist and have inspired projects that seek to achieve goals through commerce, citizen involvement and mobilization, training and education, media and information exchange and even through religion. In this context of ‘diplomacy from below’ NGOs such as Search for Common Ground (SFCG), the Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT), the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), but also public sector actors such as Universities,
have developed projects that focus on the ‘low’ politics, associated with people’s everyday lives and preoccupations. Such projects, mainly seek to create spaces of encounter with the ‘other’ and facilitate sharing and exchanging of experiences and pursuing common goals. Although the bulk of such interventions has primarily targeted Bosnia and Herzegovina, the southern Balkans have also seen similar initiatives. Some of the most successful include projects that:

- support regional media cooperation across ethnic boundaries, such as projects run by SFCG within Macedonia bringing together local media from different parts of the country encouraging the production of common media output.

- engage in the crucial fields of education and socialization with projects designed to promote inter-ethnic understanding, tolerance, and trust in shared learning environments such as (a) the SFCG Mozaik, a bi-lingual pre-school education programme introduced in 2000 in a number of Macedonian schools bringing together Albanian and Macedonian children and teachers in the same classroom, or (b) the Understanding Current History project launched in 2002 by the Center for Human Rights and Conflict Resolution of the Sts Cyril and Methodius University of Skopje, attempting to promote an exchange of views and understanding of the 2001 events in Macedonia among secondary education age students.

- encourage potential opinion leaders to meet and engage with their counterparts from other communities and ethnic groups. A characteristic example is the Leadership and Community Building Programme organized by UMCOR and ACT in Kosovo for young leaders from all of the ethnic groups in Eastern Kosovo, while the now established Konitsa Summer School in North-western Greece brings together young academics from throughout the region to share reflections of the geopolitical and cultural space their nations and communities share, the impact of rigid borders in people’s lives, imagination and capacity.

- divert energies into positive projects that benefit people regardless of community affiliation such as the SFCG Eko Patrols project that bring together secondary level students from different communities and schools of Macedonia in order to monitor historical and cultural sites and engage in preservation, recycling, and ecological activities and provide opportunities for children to gain a greater appreciation and understanding of those they traditionally perceive as ‘others’.
The outcomes of this adoption of Track II and III diplomacy by, mainly, non-governmental actors have been encouraging but very limited. So far, there have been a few sporadic initiatives that have attempted to mobilize resources beyond the governmental field and engage a variety of actors from the communities concerned in order to advance new understandings of the situation and explore new modes of coexistence.

One of the key problems – perhaps the major one - we face when dealing with conflict in the region is that we do not have the capability to visualize and imaginatively articulate multiple efforts at multiple levels to achieve peace and, more importantly, cooperation, confidence, capacity building and reconciliation between peoples and communities whose perception of the region and the world is shaped by historically conditioned fears and prejudice. Even imaginative initiatives such as the Stability Pact incorporate conflict-handling mechanisms for the Balkans and provide scope for some aspects of grassroots involvement in conflict transformation (such as the encouragement of advocacy) but patently neglect other important aspects such as citizen-to-citizen interaction, training, and education, religion or communications and the media. But the fact remains that grassroots involvement is key to overcoming the prejudice and mistrust that lies at the centre of many of the current problems.

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