FORGIVENESS, PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE BALKANS A SURVEY OF ALBANIAN STUDENTS

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Abstract

The Balkans have long struggled with issues of identity-based conflict and grievances. What is the solution? This study assesses perspectives of students from Epoka University on how to best resolve historical grievances in the Balkans. In particular, the study seeks to explore how readings of autobiographical stories by victims of atrocities and subsequent class discussions impact student perspectives. Survey findings suggest that the impact of class readings is statistically insignificant. It does find, however, that students support multiple approaches to resolving Balkan conflicts, particularly ones focusing on face-to-face meetings of individuals from different identity groups, group apologies, punishment of perpetrators, compensation for past injustices, and forgiveness. Membership in the EU and redrawn national borders are also viewed as good solutions by the majority of students. Few students see rewriting history books to omit mention of past violence as very useful. Furthermore, a majority of respondents said that they would only use peaceful, nonviolent means to pursue justice. While the survey may not be representative of the larger population, it does shed light on the support for grievance resolution in one specific population in the Balkans and may assist peace-makers in developing strategies to address long-standing grievances between communities in the Balkans, in particular the value of readings and discussion focused on finding the best response to atrocity. Beyond its initial findings, this study seeks to draw attention to questions of how best to resolve conflicts in the Balkans and encourage further research in the area.

Keywords: *Balkans, conflict, injustice, forgiveness, reconciliation, peace*

Introduction

Identity-based conflict to avenge perceived wrongs of the past is one of the tragic realities of Balkan history. Such conflict varies from the small-scale blood feuds to large-scale inter-ethnic conflicts. The cycles of discrimination, atrocity, rebellion, and revenge are too numerous, tangled, and disputed to be adequately addressed here, but are evident in surveys of Balkan history (Jelavich and Jelavich, 1977; Gerolymatos, 2002; Hupchick, 2002) or even a brief snapshots, such as Pope

Innocent III's admonition against the Fourth Crusade for their deplorable behavior in sacking Constantinople (1204) or the documentation of Mladic's atrocities in Srebrenica collected by the International Court of Transitional Justice for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY, 2012). Even the recent *Balkans: Foreign Affairs, Politics and Socio-Cultures* (Center for European Studies, 2011b)*, a collection of chapters on the Balkans written by scholars from around the region and beyond, illustrates the fact that it is necessary to hear from many different perspectives in order to grasp the complexity of Balkan history and the many explicit and implicit grievances that various Balkan identity groups hold against each other.

In light of this history, what is the solution to the identity-based conflicts in the Balkans? Several approaches to addressing conflict in the Balkans seem apparent: 1) The creation of ethnically homogeneous nation-states; 2) Imitation of, or integration into, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU); 3) Punishment of perpetrators and possibly giving restitution; 4) Collective amnesia—forgetting the past; and 5) Forgiveness and reconciliation.

This study seeks to assess student opinions on these potential solutions, focusing primarily on the final option of forgiveness. Before progressing, however, it would be helpful to briefly consider each option.

Although the first option seems quite appealing—as it was in the terms of national self-determination sought by President Wilson—it has resulted in horrific atrocities because many ethnic groups are too geographically mixed. These atrocities for the sake of ethnic homogeneity are seen in the Balkans Wars of the early 1900s, the population exchanges of the Lausanne Treaty (Gerolymatos, 2002; Hupchick, 2002), and the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Despite its shortcomings and inability to guarantee good governance once an ethnically homogenous state has been crated, this option does remain a popular idea among some Balkan peoples, as demonstrated in part by the continued discussions on creating a "Greater" or "Natural" Albania to unite all Albanian peoples into one state (Center for European Studies, 2011a).

The second option, imitation of, or integration into, NATO and the EU carries many apparent benefits. Despite its recent economic crises, the EU and the EU's predecessor organizations have accomplished a remarkable feat—forging over a half-century of peace for European identity groups that had previously carried on intermittent war with each other for millennia. NATO, by creating a military alliance between many states in and beyond Europe, has contributed to this half-century of peace between member states as well. In fact, the recently-created (2005) Energy Community of South East Europe "is consciously modeled on the European Steel and Coal Community that was the genesis for the European Union" (European Commission, 2005) as a first step towards replicating the EU's success in the Balkans (Renner, 2009). The membership of all Balkan states in NATO would likewise reduce the potential for armed conflict on the peninsula. Furthermore, membership in the EU, in which all ethnic and linguistic identity groups are minorities, and in which minority rights are protected, should reduce the present

tensions between minority and majority populations in Balkan states. The transparent governments, attention to human rights, and liberalized trade required by the EU should additionally address the discontent that sparked many previous Balkan conflicts. Despite these benefits, membership in the EU and/or NATO does not directly address the desire for revenge arising from historical grievances.

The third option, punishment for perpetrators of past crimes and possible restitution is an attempt to address the need for justice in light of past atrocities. In fact, this is the very mission of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), as stated by the former ICTY President, Antonio Cassese (n.d.) on the tribunal's website: "Justice is an indispensible ingredient of the process of national reconciliation. It is essential to the restoration of peaceful and normal relations between people who have lived under a reign of terror. It breaks the cycle of violence, hatred, and extra-judicial retribution. Thus peace and justice go hand in hand" (ICTY, n.d., "About"). Courts can eliminate the need for others to exact vengeance, but this can only be done for those still alive and in instances in which witnesses and evidence can be found. Courts are unable to bring justice when witnesses are intimidated or dead, evidence is suppressed, or if the perpetrators are also dead. Thus they are often limited when addressing historical grievances or when identity groups hide their crimes.

The fourth option tries to eliminate the narratives that spark violence. This practice is most obvious in those Balkan countries that became Communist (Hupchick, 2002, pp. 424-5), for in suppressing the stories that motivate revenge and further conflict, a government would potentially bring greater peace and stability to a country or region. However, the "persistent nationalism" (ibid) of the Balkans shows that any attempt to erase history from the consciences of a nation is a very difficult task.

The fifth option, and the one on which this study primarily focuses, is that of working towards forgiveness. Seven biographical or autobiographical texts that were read in whole or in part by some of the students who participated in this study provide helpful contributions to a discussion on the practicality and reasons for forgiveness.

Socrates, as portrayed by Plato in Socrates' *Apology*, is a man who is willing to sacrifice his life in the non-violent pursuit of truth and refuses to give up his mission to encourage others to pursue "wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul." Although he does not explicitly forgive his countrymen who sentence him to death, he does claim to "honor and love" them and practices the pursuit of truth that some scholars, such as the Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu (2005) and the Yale theologian Miroslav Volf (2006), see as a necessary prerequisite for forgiveness.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963), in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" seeks to follow in the footsteps of Socrates and Jesus by being willing to nonviolently speak truth despite possible persecution and death. Like Tutu, he sees a path of non-

punitive reconciliation between races as the only one that would avoid bloody race wars.

Kemal Pervanic (n.d.), of a Bosnian Muslim background, provides a compelling story of forgiving his former neighbors who tortured him in the Omarska concentration camp. In *The Forgiveness Project*, an online compilation of forgiveness testimonies from around the world, Pervanic remarks: "I didn't decide not to hate because I'm a good person, I decided not to hate because hating would have finished the job they'd started so successfully. It would have poisoned me." He describes how "One cold January morning I was in the shower when suddenly I found myself saying, 'I forgive you'." Although he does not ascribe his forgiveness to a religious command and claims that he "had no religion," he does say, "Perhaps it was because my father's recent death had inspired me to make some personal amends".

Azim Khamisa (n.d.), another contributor to *The Forgiveness Project*, describes his motivation to forgive the aspiring sixteen-year-old gangster who shot his son: "As a Sufi Muslim, I turned to my faith. For the next few weeks I survived through prayer and was quickly given the blessing of forgiveness, reaching the conclusion that there were victims at both ends of the gun." Besides describing forgiveness as a "blessing" he received after weeks of prayer, he cites the practical benefits of forgiveness: "You do forgiveness for yourself, because it moves you on. The fact that it can also heal the perpetrator is the icing on the cake." In this pragmatic view of forgiveness as healing, Khamisa echoes Pervanic's perspective that forgiveness frees him from the hate that "would have poisoned me."

Like Khamisa, Corrie ten Boom (1971) sees the ability to forgive as a gift that comes from outside herself. Despite helping Jews hide from the Nazis during WWII and witnessing the inhumanity of the Nazis and her sister's death in Ravensbruck concentration camp, ten Boom is able to forgive a former camp guard. When she first sees him after giving a talk on forgiveness, she is completely unable to forgive; however, after an on-the-spot prayer, she finds herself filled with love for the man and is able to forgive. She concludes: "And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself" (p. 247-8). Thus Corrie ten Boom clearly believes that forgiveness is commanded by God but is only possible because of God's forgiveness and the ability He gives to forgive others.

Immaculée Ilibagiza (2006) offers a powerful narrative of forgiveness in her autobiography, *Left to Tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan Holocaust.* Ilibagiza is a Tutsi who survived the genocide in Rwandan in which all the members of her family—except for one brother studying abroad at the time—were murdered by Hutu neighbors. After the war, she has an opportunity to confront the man who had murdered her mother and brother and looted her family's farm. She narrates a dream she had before meeting her family's killer, a dream that she

attributes to God, and in which her brother tells her, "You must love, and you must forgive those who have trespassed against us" (p. 202).

When she finally meets the man who killed her brother and mother, she forgives him, and when asked how she could do such a thing, says, "Forgiveness is all I have to offer" (p. 204). Thus like Khamisa and ten Boom, Ilibagiza seems to attribute her ability to forgive to divine help, and like Khamisa and Pervanic, she may see forgiveness as the only logical solution, as may be inferred from the line "all I have to offer."

Yet not all readings that relate to this study suggest that forgiveness is the only possible response to atrocity. Elie Wiesel (1958), a famous Jewish writer and Holocaust survivor, in his autobiographical novel *Night*, apparently does not forgive. This can be surmised from his description of continuing to hate the Hungarian guards who drove the Jews to the deportation trains (p. 37), accusing God of being unjust in permitting the Holocaust (p. 86), and his seeming inability to forgive himself for abandoning his dying father (p. 130). Although Wiesel does not forgive, he does echo the theme of Socrates and King in telling and non-violently pursuing truth as a duty of utmost importance—in Wiesel's case in order to prevent another atrocity like the Holocaust (p. 13).

These narratives are compelling ones, describing the experiences and thinking of a number of people who have suffered terrible injustice and have wrestled with how best to respond to such evil. Some chose not to forgive, but rather to tell their story so as to prevent another Holocaust or encourage the nonviolent pursuit of truth. Others have chosen to forgive, seeing forgiveness as a divinely enabled or commanded responsibility and/or as a practical necessity for one's own sanity and to break the cycle of violence. Thus it would be interesting to see what Balkan inhabitants think about these narratives, and how the narratives may impact attitudes towards the usefulness of forgiveness. That, in fact, is the primary purpose of this study: How might biographical or autobiographical texts describing forgiving or non-forgiving responses to atrocity impact student opinions on how best to respond to identity-based injustices?

Because young people in the Balkans will be the leaders of tomorrow, it is important to know what they think about the possible solutions to identity-based grievances and conflicts in the Balkans. Although a Balkan-wide survey was beyond the scope of this paper, the study surveys opinions of a group of students from Epoka University in Tirana, Albania.

The study does show that a higher percentage of those who engaged with one or more of the seven texts described above saw forgiveness as a good response to identity-based grievances in the Balkans; however, the difference in responses is not shown to be statistically significant. It also finds that most students think that all but the collective-amnesia proposal to Balkan conflicts of the five proposed above are useful.

Methodology

The survey developed to answer the research questions of this study was posted on q-set.de on 26 June 2012. Invitation emails were sent to 438 students who had formerly participated in the author's English classes at Epoka University over the previous three academic years. Some of the invited students had participated in classes in which portions of one or more of the seven testimonial texts on responses to injustice and atrocity were assigned as readings, while others were in classes that did not have any such assignment. Although not every student in classes in which the readings were assigned read the texts, many of the students were exposed to the themes in the texts if they participated in class discussions of the texts. The fact that student exposure to the texts varied allowed for a study that could compare the responses of students who had read the texts with those who had not read the texts.

The survey was administered over two weeks after the end of the spring semester at Epoka, from 26 June to 11 July 2012. Of the 438 invited students, 85 completed at least part of the survey. Thus the response rate of those who participated in the survey was approximately 19%. Data from the completed surveys was analyzed using the PSPP statistical analysis program. This paper offers preliminary findings from the survey.

Results and Discussion

The key question assessing student opinions towards a number of possible approaches to conflicts in the Balkans is shown in Table 1 below. The table includes response frequency and valid percents for each of the options, as well as a cumulative "Total positive" response category that combines the "Very useful", "Moderately useful", and "A good idea, but impractical" responses into one. As some of the answers earned the same ranking by the "Total Positive" score, a weighted score was calculated to rank the proposals. This score gave "Very useful" answers a weight of 2, "Moderately useful" responses a weight of 1, "A good idea, but impractical" answers a weight of 0.5, "Not useful" a weight of -2, and "No opinion" a weight of -0.5. The proposals for addressing grievances in the Balkans are thus ranked by the weighted score.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the practical, relational-level solutions of face-to-face meetings and group apologies rank as the two top solutions, respectively. Indeed, such suggestions are likely pre-requisites for later forgiveness and reconciliation. Student support for group apologies implies a recognition that injustice occurred, and thus echoes Socrates, King, Tutu, and Volf in their insistence on seeking truth. This insight also touches on a class reading from *The Forgiveness Project* that was not previously addressed in the survey—the story of John Carter (n.d.), a violent man who finally finds peace when he meets face-to-face with one of his former victims, apologizes, and is surprised at her wiliness to forgive him. Carter's story

and the insights of the students in this survey suggest that face-to-face meetings and apologies likely need more attention as precursors to forgiveness.

Justice is essential, although students saw that punishing the key leaders of the atrocities is more important than punishing all participants. Providing compensation to victims or their descendents and creating a "Natural Albania"—which many Albanians see as a rectification of the artificial division of Albanian-populated territories by the Treaty of London in 1913—also receive much support.

Although earning higher overall positive support, Albanian integration in the EU received a lower weighted ranking because of the many who saw it as a "good idea, but impractical." Thus it is placed eighth out of ten options in Table 1.

The proposal of forgiveness receives positive support from a majority of students, even those who did not read the texts on which the study focuses (Table 2). Although the data from the survey shows what appears to be a consistently higher support for forgiveness by students who read the texts discussed above (Table 2), this is not proven to be a statistically significant finding, as a chi-squared test is considered unreliable because some expected values are less than five and, even when conducted, the chi-squared test results show that the findings are not in the significant range.

Table 1: Rank the effectiveness of each of the following possible solutions for ethnic conflicts in the Balkans

72/85 Respondents

		VU*	MU	NOT	G,I	NO	TPR O	WS
We should encourage more face-to-face meetings between members of different ethnic groups	N**	38	21	2	5	6	**64**	**1.285**
	%***	53%	29%	3%	7%	8%	**89%**	**1.285**
Each ethnic group should apologize for the crimes committed by its people or ancestors	N	37	19	2	8	6	**64**	**1.250**
	%	51%	26%	3%	11%	8%	**89%**	**1.250**
We should punish the leaders who organized the genocides in Bosnia and Kosovo	N	39	13	4	12	4	**64**	**1.208**
	%	54%	18%	6%	17%	6%	**89%**	**1.208**
A 'Natural' or 'Greater' Albania should be created	N	33	17	5	14	3	**64**	**1.090**
	%	46%	24%	7%	19%	4%	**89%**	**1.090**

Ethnic groups or countries that committed genocide should give money and land to the families of the victims	*N*	31	18	3	14	6	**63**	**1.083**
	%	43%	25%	4%	19%	8%	**88%**	**1.083**
We should punish *all* people who committed war crimes and are still alive	*N*	35	16	8	7	6	**58**	**0.979**
	%	49%	22%	11%	10%	8%	**81%**	**0.979**
We should all forgive the wrongs of the past	*N*	28	16	11	11	6	**55**	**0.729**
	%	39%	22%	15%	15%	8%	**76%**	**0.729**
All Balkan countries should join the EU	*N*	20	24	9	15	4	**59**	**0.715**
	%	28%	33%	13%	21%	6%	**82%**	**0.715**
National borders should be changed so each country has only one ethnic group	*N*	14	15	19	13	11	**42**	**0.083**
	%	19%	21%	26%	18%	15%	**58%**	**0.083**
We should rewrite history books and omit mention of ethnic violence	*N*	20	11	26	3	12	**34**	**-0.076**
	%	28%	15%	36%	4%	17%	**47%**	**-0.076**

*VU = "Very useful"; MU = "Moderately useful"; NOT = "Not useful"; G,I = "A good idea, but impractical"; NO = "No opinion"; TPRO = "Total positive"; WS = "Weighted score"

** *N* = number of respondents in each category

*** Indicates valid percent and excludes respondents who did not answer the question. Percents are rounded to nearest whole percent and thus may not add to 100 and may differ from total percents.

Table 2: Cross-Tabulation of Opinions on Forgiveness and Reading Participation

		VU*	MU	NOT	G,I	NO	Total	**TPRO**
We should all forgive the wrongs of the past	*N***	28	16	11	11	6	72	**55**
	%***	39%	22%	15%	15%	8%		**76%**
Did not read texts								
Wiesel	*N*	11	2	6	3	1	23	**16**
	%	48%	9%	26%	13%	4%		**70%**
Socrates	*N*	6	3	4	2	2	17	**11**
	%	35%	18%	24%	12%	12%		**65%**
MLK	*N*	8	4	5	3	3	23	**15**
	%	35%	17%	22%	13%	13%		**65%**
FP CT II	*N*	13	4	8	5	3	33	**22**
	%	39%	12%	24%	15%	9%		**67%**

Assumed to have read texts

Wiesel	N	15	7	4	6	5	37	**28**
	%	41%	19%	11%	16%	14%		**76%**
Socrates	N	18	7	6	8	4	43	**33**
	%	42%	16%	14%	19%	9%		**77%**
MLK	N	17	6	5	7	3	38	**30**
	%	45%	16%	13%	18%	8%		**79%**
FP CT II	N	12	6	3	5	3	29	**23**
	%	41%	21%	10%	17%	10%		**79%**

*VU = "Very useful"; MU = "Moderately useful"; NOT = "Not useful"; G,I = "A good idea, but impractical"; NO = "No opinion"; TPRO = "Total positive"

** *N* = number of respondents in each category

*** Indicates valid percent and excludes respondents who did not answer the question. Percents are rounded to nearest whole percent and thus may not add to 100. Despite the lack of statistically significant findings to the question of whether the readings correlate to higher support for forgiveness, the overall high level of support for forgiveness does show that the initial presumption of this paper is false. That is, the presumption that the Balkans are rampant with ethnic grievances and a desire for revenge is not true. Yes, there are many awful stories of revenge, but at least in this small survey population of Epoka University students, a high percentage of respondents support face-to-face meetings between different identity groups, group apologies, and forgiveness, along with the pursuit of justice, restitution, and membership in the EU.

However, the support for a "Natural Albania" is disconcerting for those who remember that such language was used by parties instigating WWII and the many Balkan wars. Yet if the free movement of people is achieved and discrimination is abolished in the Balkans, either through membership in the EU or some other way, current territorial divisions will lose much of their significance and the impetus behind this call for a "Natural Albania" will likely dissipate. Furthermore, survey questions find that only 15% of respondents explicitly supported the use of force for achieving justice, 62% insisted on exclusively peaceful means, and 23% responded with "Other". Thus although many students support a "Natural Albania", they would insist on peaceful means to pursue this goal.

The only proposal to receive less than majority support is that advocating historical amnesia: "We should rewrite history books and omit mention of ethnic violence." This conforms with the insistence on truth in many of the readings and with the students' support for apologies, legal justice, compensation, and forgiveness.

Conclusion

Do the stories of real people who choose to peacefully seek truth in the face of injustice or forgive those who grievously harmed them or their families inspire

students to consider forgiveness as a good solution to Balkan conflicts? The statistical analysis of survey data in this study fails to show a significant impact. However, the survey does give a number of encouraging insights for those interested in peace in the Balkans. The majority of students surveyed view personal contacts between members of different Balkan identity groups as the best solution to conflicts in the Balkans; they see group apologies and efforts to pursue legal and territorial justice as good solutions as well. Membership in the EU is supported, but is seen by one-fifth as unrealistic. Although a majority of students support forgiveness as a solution to Balkan conflicts, this solution ranks below many other suggestions, perhaps showing a need to pursue truth, contacts, and apologies before forgiveness. Despite its brevity, the author hopes that this brief exploration of the possible impact of biographical and autobiographical narratives in response to atrocity may inspire further research on how the testimonies of those who nonviolently seek truth, justice, and possibly forgiveness in the face of injustice may foster peace in the Balkans and beyond.

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