

Complexity of Dealing with the Past (DwP)

Based on experiences in Western Balkans

The past has always been dealt with and will be dealt with in at least two different, sometimes overlapping ways: destructive and constructive.

Functions of DwP generally (defined either as constructive or destructive):

Search for sense and purpose to losses and injustices suffered.

Reflect and incorporate learning points (lessons) from the past into present and future attitudes and behaviours within our environments (micro and macro).

As societies: building defensive mechanisms around perceptions of collective threats (maybe neighbors, but maybe the war itself).

(Re)Defining social values founded on legacies of the past.

Purposes of constructive DwP:

Engaging in the search of giving purpose and sense to injustices and losses suffered. Making non-recurrence the ultimate goal.

Healing the society from the hatred - should be conducted by members of the targeted society as that implies the understanding that these goals are pursued for their own benefit.

Confront and minimise impacts of destructive DwP, hence preventing future violence or minimising the threat of it

Multiperspectives of history applied indiscriminately! - Change of societal paradigm, discovering "greatness" in peace.

Examples of destructive approach to DwP (all prolongation of the war, just without the real war ongoing):

Myth building and enemy-image creations and maintenance

Victimisation - victimhood defined as collective identity

Minimisation of own side's responsibility (applicable to ethnic groups, political groups, professional groups, gender etc.)

Revisionism of historical data, intentional manipulation (e.g. exaggerations)

Glorification of war, combat heroism etc. - feeds the illusion of a “just war” (always allegedly defensive as in BiH, Kosovo, Croatia...), or just “campaigns”

All actions mentioned above, serve the purpose of maintaining self-respect and an honourable appearance (e.g. of a soldier protecting lives of the innocent, own people, own country, relatives etc). Wars are allegedly never fought for selfish reasons, only humanistic ones. And if one thinks that all of this applies to all other countries but your own and your country's allies, it may be a surprise to find so many who think alike in the Balkans.

Acting from and enjoying the moral high ground by those who were right at the very beginning (against war) and hence have developed a belief in own faultlessness. (quite a few NGOs who were, to a certain degree, pushed into and locked in this position by external powerful actors who like hearing what they think themselves - who does not sometimes?)

Examples of constructive approach to DwP:

Making distinction between collective responsibilities and individual guilt

Acknowledgement and respect paid to victims of sufferings inflicted by own side

Defining losses and encouraging hope for the better

Truth finding and acknowledgement of different interpretations

Attempting to change rather than to destroy

Attempting to win over rather than ridicule or alienate

Shifting the societal paradigm from war heroism as value towards peace as value; learning lessons from violent history and applying them to prevent reoccurrence; setting examples (ex-combatants visiting atrocity sites jointly and paying respect to victims)

Examples of DwP which is both destructive and constructive in its different aspects

Repair in order to function - skip underlying causes and injustices and maintain absence of direct violence, through power imbalance and/or new injustices. Example: Application of international humanitarian law as the key element of DwP. Dilemma: Go along repairing or not?

Demand revenge as the form of justice. (Victims groups who rightfully demand truth about the fate of their loved ones and punishment of perpetrators, often also propagate hatred against whole groups they perceive as enemies and foster revenge). Challenge: How to confront such actions?

Obstacles to constructive DwP:

Tendency to simplify and present the past in “black and white”, as usual mechanisms of comprehending and rationalising the world around us.

“negatively” built born-in identities (Croats as Non-Serbs and vica versa)

Attempts to eradicate certain identities or build new ones, rather than supporting redefinition of existing identities (example of Bosnian identity, often supported by foreigners as it appears to be an easy solution to ethnic antagonism)

Natural resistance to accepting own/own side’s responsibility

Self-righteous groups involved in blameshifting (some of: ex-combatants, victims representatives, NGOs) > Ownership of truth, justice, victimhood, hence higher moral ground than lower and “barbaric” enemies’

Reluctance and fear to confront demands for revenge by some victims’ representatives.

Approaching DwP solely from the judicial standpoint of humanitarian law and focussing on committed war-crimes - as if all would be good if wars were conducted to kill “only” soldiers and some civilians (“regrettably” and “collaterally”).

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