

The wars in Former Yugoslavia continue in the classroom

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Children from Croatian Catholic families attend class in the right side of the building. On the left, the students are predominantly Muslim. Credit: Laura Boushnak

According to the Education Act, schools in the ethnically divided Bosnia and Herzegovina must teach students "democratic ideals in a multicultural society." But according to new research from the University of Copenhagen, the opposite happens: Segregated schools

perpetuate ethnic divisions between Croats, Serbs and Bosniaks, making reconciliation after the 1992-1995 wars extremely difficult.

25 years ago, the warring factions in the war in former Yugoslavia signed a peace agreement. Bosnia and Herzegovina, where 100,000 people lost their lives during the war, is now an independent state comprising the Bosnian-Croatian Federation and the Republika Srpska. It is a division that reflects the three groups in the country: The Muslim Bosniaks, the Catholic Croats and the Orthodox Serbs.

The ethnic division of the country is also seen in the education system, where no less than thirteen ministries of education are responsible for teaching in local Serbian, Croatian and Bosniak counties.

"The education system in Bosnia and Herzegovina is an example of how even the best intentions can lead to bad results: In the Education Act, which was drafted on the initiative of the international community, emphasis is placed on promoting students' democratic education in a multicultural society. In principle, this is what all parties have agreed on, says Ph.D. Selma Bukovica Gundersen, who has just defended her Ph.D. dissertation on the history classes in Bosnia and Herzegovina's schools," she continues:

"In practice, this is just not what happens because when the new constitution was written in 1995, the international community also wanted to ensure that children could be taught in their own language. This had the unintended consequence that the previous nationwide education system was replaced with an ethnically segregated system with curricula and textbooks in the now three official languages—which is basically one and the same language. This means, for example, that the pupils are presented with three fundamentally different versions of the war 1992-1995 in their history classes, depending on whether they attend a Croatian, Serbian or Bosniak school. In this way, the schools

perpetuate ethnic and religious differences rather than prepare the ground for dialogue about the difficult and sensitive past."

The children are left alone with difficult thoughts

In connection with her dissertation, Selma Bukovica Gundersen interviewed history teachers and the other key actors in school governance, observed history classes and read a large number of documents such as curricula, history books and educational legislation. Finally, she collected and analyzed 103 essays written by schoolchildren who were trying to come to grips with their identity and their knowledge of the war 1992-1995:

"The structure of the [education](#) system and the teaching materials, which are tailored to suit specific ethnic groups, mean that children primarily identify themselves with their own group, because there is no shared identity they can choose, even if they wanted to. The schools thus sustain a 'discourse of impossibility'- that is, the notion that co-existence across ethnic and religious divides is impossible. And it is clear from the essays that many children are very alone with difficult thoughts about war, grief, identity and belonging, and these are either addressed in a very one-sided fashion at school or not at all," says Selma Bukovica Gundersen and elaborates:

"The newly elected mayor in Banja Luka, which is the capital of the Serbian part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is a young man who is perceived as the man of the future, a man with the potential to create change. He is only 27 years old and belongs to the generation I have written about in my dissertation—the generation that has no personal recollection of the war 1992-1995 but has grown up in a divided country. He does not recognize the genocide in Srebrenica or The Hague trials, and he can therefore be said to be a product of the segregated schools that reproduce the ethnonational narratives of the past. The same

separation policy that was practiced in the late 1980's and early 1990's, when World War II was the contentious subject."

History teachers are under pressure

According to Selma Bukovica Gundersen, the lack of political will in local [school](#) districts to handle the memory of the war 1992-1995 in constructive ways challenges teachers when communicating the controversial topic in their classrooms.

"Many teachers try to avoid dealing with the topic in their classes, but also acknowledge that this is hardly a viable or future-proof solution. Other teachers try to navigate between the local demands for rigorous ethnonational communication of history and the national and international demands for diversity and democratic dialogue. This is obviously not easy, and they feel under a lot of pressure," explains Selma Bukovica Gundersen and concludes, "In my view, it is absolutely crucial that the [education system](#) in Bosnia and Herzegovina is capable of introducing future generations to the causes and consequences of the war 1992-1995, but without becoming a tool for narrow religious and ethnic identities, which, unfortunately, is the case now. If the idea is that future generations should be able to unite the divided country, you need to agree on a common language for the past across ethnic boundaries and establish a narrative that subsequent generations can be taught. We must ask ourselves how long a state can survive on the basis of a purely formal and administrative link between the state and its citizens, but without a common understanding of or interpretation of history?"

According to Selma Bukovica Gundersen, the theme of the dissertation is, however, in no way unique to Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is not only important in a post-war society, but in all societies, which must deal with ethnic and religious diversity—in other words, challenges of creating a democracy that includes more cultures, and where more ethnic

groups and cultures must be able to coexist peacefully.

More information: [static-curis.ku.dk/portal/file ...
g_2020_Gundersen.PDF](https://static-curis.ku.dk/portal/file ...g_2020_Gundersen.PDF)

Provided by University of Copenhagen

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