PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE RECONCILIATION PROCESS IN FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

by Nebojša Petrović (Belgrade)

That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.
(Preamble of UNESCO)

Peace is not an absence of war, it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, justice.
(Baruch Spinoza, 1632 - 1677)

The etymology of the word ›reconciliation‹ shows that we are talking about re-conciliating or re-establishing peaceful relationships after they were disrupted by quarrels, misunderstandings, insults, injuries and other negative situations. In both everyday modern life and past times, as well as in relationships among individuals and among smaller or bigger groups, we can be witnesses to constant larger or smaller conflicts that are obviously followed by constant re-establishment of friendships and co-operation. Otherwise, the level of conflicts would just increase to the point where the world could not function any longer.

The level of development of human civilization proves that despite the constant conflicts in human history and on all levels of civilization, these other forces, forces of progress and harmony, have always been stronger. This raises the question why reconciliation between members of human communities is so important? Why would it be important that Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks reconcile, when the wars during the first half of the 1990's showed so much bestiality and hatred between these nations? Why is reconciliation between any nations who had bitter conflicts with numerous casualties important?

On the individual level, reconciliation is important for the preservation of one's mental health. The mutual bitterness of enemies works like a mental poison. The desire for revenge, the desire to do harm to another person, even if that person is the enemy, drains us of energy and prevents our mental wounds from healing. Above all, our feelings are within us. The person we hate may not even know that we exist while that negative feeling is poisoning us and taking away our energy, the energy we need for approaching life in a constructive way, the energy we need for accomplishing our goals that might bring us wellbeing.

On the level of a whole society, the conflict may re-escalate without reconciliation. That, in turn, usually means a good chance for revenge, but also a loss in all areas and the continuation of suffering. Reconciliation enables the opponents to form peaceful relationships and to see each other in a way that is functional for these new relationships. The psychological aspects of reconciliation are crucial, and different psychological factors play a major role in that process. Thus, the safety and security of the society is increased, as well as its resources, and mutual benefit will be obtained.

The main goals of my research on this subject were, on the one hand, the attempt to operationalize the reconciliation concept, which is used to establish long term stable peace after intractable conflicts, and, on the other, the analysis of the newly achieved construct through its connection with numerous demographic, social and psychological variables. Core of this paper are the relationships between the Serbs, on the one side, and the Croats and Bosniaks on the other, as well as the subjective potential for reaching a reconciliation after the conflicts and the war in the early 1990's.

Through expressions related to the social level only, failing to take into consideration the individual and psychological level, we cannot directly explain political decisions and behavior. For a start, we assume that the willingness or readiness of the opposing parties to start the reconciliation process is of the utmost importance. Where there is no readiness, one can always find formal excuses for disruptions or prolongation of this process. More often, we can remember more often conflicts on the interpersonal level, among individuals, and we can remember the experience any of us have had with conflicts on that level, all of which shows us the importance of what we call a »good will«. The situation is analogue regarding groups as well, including large social groups like nations. Such willingness is obviously a subjective characteristic. That is why we have decided to question it from the psychological point of view, and to determine as far as possible what is at its base. Which factors determine whether and to what degree someone will be for or against the reconciliation? What is the difference

1 Bar Tal, Daniel: Shared Beliefs in Society. Social Psychological Analysis. Thousand Oaks: Sage 2000, p. 162.

2 Cf. Ibid.; Bar-Tal, Daniel/ Bennink, Gemma: Nature of Reconciliation as an Outcome and as a Process. In: Bar-Siman-Tov, Yacoov (Ed.): From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation. Oxford: Oxford UP 2002; Kelman, Herbert: Transforming the Relationship between Former Enemies. A Social-psychological Analysis. In: Rothstein, Robert (Ed.): After the Peace. Resistance and Reconciliation. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers 1999, pp. 193-205; Kriesberg, Louis: Coexistence and the Reconciliation of Communual Conflicts. In: Weiner, Eugene (Ed.): The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company 1998, pp. 182-198; Lederach, John Paul: Building Peace. Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies. Washington/D.C.: United States Inst. of Peace Pr. 1997; Staub, Ervin/ Pearlman, Laurie Anne: Healing, Forgiveness and Reconciliation after Genocide and other Collective Violence. In: Helmick, Raymon/ Petersen, Rodney (Eds.) Forgiveness and Reconciliation. Religious Contributions to Confict Resolution. Radnor/PA: Templeton Foundation Pr. 2001.

3 Adorno, Theodor/Frenkel-Bruns- wik, Else/Levinson, Daniel/Sanford, Nevitt: The Authoritarian Personality. New York: Harper & Row 1950.

between those who want reconciliation and those who don't?

This is certainly one very relative social problem, and it had to be analyzed from the socio-psychological point of view, as well. In his inaugural speech after being appointed president of the International Society for Political Psychology in 2000, Ervin Staub made an appeal to his colleagues to focus their research primarily on those issues that might have direct realistic consequences. This work is one of the reactions to that appeal.

One of the major questions of social psychology from its beginning had been the question of the relationship between the individual and the collective level of analysis. Can we reach a conclusion about the whole based on our knowledge of its components, or does the whole offer a new quality that does not consist of the simple sum of its parts, but comes into being by their interactions in the new system? In this work, we have taken into consideration a problem that affects whole societies and the relationships between them. To come as close as possible to the solution of this problem, we took data received from questionnaires with individual members of those societies about their personal views and opinions. Following the historical development through the work of the most influential social psychologists like Wundt, Durkheim, McDougal, Sherif, Asch, Lewin, Moscovisi, Tajfel, Turner and Bar-Tal, we reach the conviction that this surely might be a legitimate and fruitful way. As Bar-Tal stated in 2000:

> Individuals are not only members of small groups such as families, school classes or work teams, but also participate in macro-systems such as urban or rural communities, ethnic groups, nations or religious communities. This membership is often very meaningful for the individuals. Social psychology cannot disregard this fact: that its »subjects'« view of the world is, at least partly, shared with other members of the social system, that much of this world view is acquired in the social system, that this world view is constantly negotiated in the social system, and that this common world view is a basis for communication and coordinated behaviors in the social system.[1]

This means that to many people memberships in different social systems form the reality and determine many aspect of their everyday lives. The interaction between a social system and its constituting parts – its members – is mutual.

Having that in mind, we chose to accept the suggestions of Bar-Tal who suggests that the research be put in a social frame, focusing on psychological terms and processes that form and preserve the social systems and on the sociocultural context in which individuals act as members of the group. We also decided to connect the individual and social level, micro and macro levels, taking into account that all members of the society think, feel and act as individuals, but they often do so in the social context. The basic foundation of our research is the Bar-Tal thesis that societies do not exist separately from their members, and that the meaning of one society can be understood only if we take into the account the cognitive-affective repertoire of its members. The members of a society change their society by changing their beliefs, attitudes, culture, values and behavioral patterns. There is a constant interaction and reciprocity between the repertoire of the members of the society on the one side, and the social institutions, structure, culture and other social characteristics on the other side.

So far, the literature has introduced us to the review of the existing understandings of reconciliation and its nature.[2] These brilliant speculative analyses by different authors are not identical, but shed a light to this issue from different angles. Certain elements are common to all or most (for example, many authors talk about dehumanization), certain elements are very similar but have a different name, and some elements are specific to each author. The weight or the importance given to each element is different as well, and so are the dynamics of their interaction. Based on different theoretical approaches, it is usually not possible to determine directly which point the reconciliation process after a certain conflict is at, and what the future prospects for the continuance of that process are. In short, one empirical component is still missing. Therefore, we constructed a scale-based measuring instrument based on the same idea as the research on authoritarianism,[3] by which we would determine the individual potential or the readiness to start the reconciliation process. These individual predispositions are undoubtedly socially determined in smaller or larger portions, but they alone affect the social level and determine it a great deal, which recognition is vital for this research.

4 Cattell, Raymond: The Scree Test for the Number of Factors. In: Multi-variate Behavioral Research 1 (1966), pp. 245-276.

The point of using a scale like we are is that by using it we can determine the state of readiness for the reconciliation process in the one group, sub-population or society where it is being applied. The empirical research was conducted in three phases. The first phase, we had interviews with the aim of obtaining authentic views and opinions of different people (differentiated by gender, domicile, war experience, ideological beliefs, nationality) about different aspects of reconciliation. This phase is particularly important in helping later on to make the operational statements more natural, or less artificial.

The second phase of research was the construction of the measuring scale by which one could determine the readiness or the potential to start and to follow the road of the reconciliation. This was one of the two basic goals of the research. The procedure for the construction of the Likert scales has been followed in full, and the sample consisted by 1116 persons from three countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia.

The third phase consisted of six alongside questionnaires that partially examined the connectivity of the larger number of psychological and socio-psychological characteristics and the readiness to reconcile, which was the second basic goal of the research. Basic psychological characteristics like aggressiveness and anxiety were included, as well as empathy or self-esteem, values and value orientations, preferences of individual and social goals, group identifications (national for example), types of expectations, fears and hopes relating to the future etc. In this phase, the sample consisted of 3648 people from three countries.

In the scale construction, we began with the assumption that the »readiness for reconciliation« does not mean the same thing for people with different war experiences, people from different places, of whom some only saw the war on television, while others had contact with refugees they did not know, or knew relatives, friends or acquaintances in the military forces, or they were forced to changed their domicile, or had personally experienced war or had war victims among people they were close to. The readiness for reconciliation can for some people represent the dilemma whether to go to the concert of some music star from the state that was until recently the enemy, while for others it can be connected with certain existential questions and everyday acceptance or backstabbing. We expected that among all those different people there is (more or less, or maybe not at all) some basic subjective potential, a certain basic readiness or willingness to react positively or negatively in any of these very different situations, and that people whose potential of this kind is stronger interpret events in a different way from the people whose potential is weaker or does not exist. In order to determine this basic part, that is independent from concrete experience, we questioned people from all three countries: Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, expecting that such a varied sample will enable us to reach those aspects that are vital for reconciliation or the readiness to reconcile.

After the second phase and the response of the people who were questioned, a general pool of 159 statements was formed and a factor analysis with Mahplan Rotation was performed upon those statements. Following Cattell's scree testing[4] of the relevancy of factors we reached a four-factor model. We interpreted the first factor as lack of confidence in the ex-opponent's intentions, the second factor we interpreted as readiness to co-operate in different fields, the third factor as readiness to give and to receive forgiveness, while the fourth factor represented re-labeling human characteristics to the opponent – rehumanization. Each factor forms a subscale of 10 statements. Examples of statements from the first subscale are:

1. When I hear that someone is one of them I am suspicious and careful.
2. They should never be trusted again, even if good official relations were established.

From the second subscale:

3. We should strive to the establishment of all kinds of connections with them.
4. I think that the cooperation with them is necessary and of mutual interest.

From the third subscale:

5. It is necessary to forgive each other for the sake of a better future.
6. We will all remain part of the past without forgiving and reconciliation.

5 Huddy, Leonie: Group Identity and Political Cohesion. In David O. Sears/Leonie Huddy/Robert Jervis (Eds.): Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology. New York: Oxford UP 2003, pp. 511-558.

And from the fourth subscale:

7. The fact that some people committed a crime doesn't make the whole nation into criminals.
8. The life of one of us is not worth more than the life of some of them.

The reliability of the subscales is expressed through the »Cronbach Alpha Coefficient« and is 0,89 to 0,94, while the reliability of the scale in total is 0,9673. When the subjects fill the scale in full, these four factors explain 58% of the variance. Special factor analysis on subsamples from different countries had shown that the factor structure on these subsamples is practically identical to the factor structure obtained on the total sample, which tells us that it is a more solid and basic structure.

By taxonomic analysis of the responses to 40 statements of the readiness to reconciliation scale, one of the basic criteria of the reality of the psychological constructs has been confirmed – criteria of the taxonomic discriminativity. Therefore, through analysis of the responses of over 3600 people questioned, we obtained taxons of those who are higher/lower/in the middle of the examined dimension.

Due to the fact that we have chosen a large number of variables, we made six variations to the questionnaire, and in each variation we included the scale of readiness to reconciliation and a few most relevant independent variables (gender, nationality etc), while the other variables entered only one version of the questionnaire each. In that way, we managed to connect all predictor variables to the one that was at the center of attention, and the subjects were presented with questionnaires of bearable length. Thus we conducted not only one questionnaire, but a combination of six parallel questionnaires. The preparation was technically very complex because each of the six variations included a Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian subversion (in terms of little language variations), and the Serbian version included subversions covering their relationships with Croats and Bosniaks, thus making 24 different versions in total.

In this empirical research, we saw that the readiness for reconciliation bears a negative or positive relation to the number of variables, and that people who differ a great deal by the degree of readiness to join the reconciliation process differ by many other characteristics as well. All correlational analyses showed mostly expected correlations. The readiness for reconciliation has a negative correlation with nationalism (-0,72) and concepts similar to nationalism, like blind patriotism (-0,43), the importance of belonging to one's nation (-0,40) and the social distance to other nations.

The results show an extremely high negative correlation of nationalism with the new scale in total, and also with its subscales. Thus, we have the empirical confirmation that nationalism is a great obstacle on the road to reconciliation. This is also another confirmation of the validity of the scale. However, this correlation is so great that we can ask ourselves if there is a point in identifying the readiness for reconciliation solely with the lack of nationalism. We could not accept such equalization either for the different levels of defining and theoretical status, or when we compare the content of statements by which these two constructs are measured. Still, it is clear that both nationalism and the non-readiness for the reconciliation are backed by a large number of same elements that determine both dimensions.

Nationalism is provoked by strong threats during conflicts, which includes solidarity inside the group and hostility outside of the group. Nationalism reduces trust and deepens the conflict through different mechanisms. The ethnocentric reaction, according to Huddy[5] leads to inflicting more rigid and strict group forms through lowered solidarity, loyalty and cohesion.

Other close constructs show a similar connection with the readiness for reconciliation. We obtained unique tendencies in social distance towards other nations, regardless of whether those are nation who were involved in recent conflicts or not. The opposite is valid for social distance towards our own group. Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks who were more ready for reconciliation have lower social distance towards all nations for whom that distance was measured than members of their own national group who are less ready to reconcile or are opposed to reconciliation totally.

6 Cf. Tajfel, Hanry: Human Groups and Social Categories. Studies in Social Psychology. Cambridge: Cambride UP 1981.

7 Fromm, Erich: The Revolution of Hope. New York: Harper Collins 1968.

The greater number of heterostereotypes (towards other nations) are negative, but the subjects who are opposed to reconciliation describe other national groups only in severe devaluating terms: cruel, fascist, fundamentalist, etc, while they describe their own group as understanding, just, patriots, brave, etc. The subjects who scored high on the reconciliation scale mark other groups by somewhat »softer« negative words: nationalist, aggressive, untruthful, but also as proud, patriots or hospitable. Autostereotypes of this group are also more balanced, and even though they describe their own group as patriotic, hospitable etc., they also often choose adjectives like lazy, bragging, etc.

The readiness for reconciliation has an expected and very negative relation with emotions towards other nations, like rage and anger. Rage and anger are huge obstacles on the road to reconciliation, which is logical and to be expected. On the other hand, positive emotional reactions and feelings like hope, optimism and faith in the better future are elements that show we are on the right path towards reconciliation among nations.

Further, negative relations exist with variables that relate to religion, which paradoxically show a consistent negative connection with the readiness for reconciliation. We see no other explanation than that people do not declare themselves religious because of the dogmas of their religion, but rather because of the underlined religious difference between the nations. Religious borders are the only visible borders among those nations and these are the way they can maintain the borders of their national identity, as has been explained in the theories on social identity and social categorization by Tajfel and Turner.[6] Fromm[7] also found that religion in terms of religious heat and live faith is paradoxically supported mainly by those who declare themselves non-religious.

The readiness to reconciliation has further negative relation with different aspects of anomie, the evaluation of hopelessness and negative expectations from the future, as well as from the lack of trust in social norms and democratic institutions. In turn, those not ready for reconciliation have expressed confidence towards the church and the army as social institutions. When speaking about ideological variables, in general we can say that a clear positive connectivity is obtained between readiness to reconciliation and social, liberal and humanitarian ideas, while that connection was negative when we talked about conservative and traditional values. It is interesting that the relation of the degree of personal experience of trauma and non-readiness for reconciliation is statistically important (0,15), but is far lower than the one might at first expect. This clearly shows that a high potential to reconcile can exist even among those whose war experiences were traumatic, while on the other hand, we can find opponents of reconciliation among those who did not experience the terrors of war at all.

All related elements were either directly or indirectly connected with hope, optimism, giving meaning to life and faith in the possibility of accomplishing human and social potentials. The opposite of hope is passivity, resignation and stagnation. If we understand life in a defeatist way, if other nations and people are looked on as eternal enemies whom we can never trust, if there is no hope and no bright future that we are striving towards, there is nothing else to do but to suffer. However, people like those we have questioned, those who have big hopes and who are fearless, are ready to form what a bright future should represent, what a better world should represent, with better relationships among men. That shall be the strongest engine that will move them forward, that will not let them back down under problems or have second thoughts under obstacles that they are about to encounter.

It is significant to mention that, according to the largest number of examined variables, what influences their differences most is much more likely to be their attitude towards reconciliation than their national identity. That might mean that people who are prone to reconciliation are very close to each other in terms of the values that they stand up for, their beliefs and stands, and their view of life in general, so we might say that they form a homogenic group among each other rather than as members of their nations. What is more interesting, is that those who are opposed to reconciliation, even though they see the other side as their biggest opponents and eternal enemies, are very much alike to the similar group on the other side. In any case, they have much more in common with similar groups on the opposite side than with their own fellow countrymen who have different views of the world. Even though they insist that they are for equality of all members of their nation, that is not true. As much as they are intolerant towards members of other nations, they are also intolerant towards members

of their own nation who do not share their values and goals. They also send threats to the officials of their national group that have been chosen by the majority of the votes of that nation, when they promote politics which the »monopolists of the rights to patriotism« do not find appealing. Thus they prove that they are opposed even to their own nation when that nation does not accept their values.

The readiness to reconcile, or the trust in the other side, the readiness to cooperate, to give and to receive forgiveness, to see the opponent as a human being is related to the selectivity of the information that we do or do not want to accept and the way we interpret objective events. This readiness is projected by individuals onto objective outside events. Thus, the newly interpreted events influence further the line of events and the future level of readiness. As we have shown that violence, both physical and media, initiated the negative whirl of hatred and crime at one time of the social crisis and changes of social values, we also think that this readiness or good will should be the base of initiating positive feedback and it should give energy to spread positive ideas and actions. Political leaders' messages are important for that, but also messages from other setters of public opinion. In this research, we wanted to stress the bottom-up process, so we did not cover the questions of influence by the political elite, the editing policy in media as formers of the public opinion, etc. The influence »from above« shall have an effect on the members of the society only if they reach a fertile soil or a readiness towards the proposed information and values by most members of the society. Reconciliation is therefore something that affects all members of each nation involved in the conflict and it is not possible to reach reconciliation without having the consent and the readiness of the majority of the nations' members.

Our research shows that there are many people ready to start reconciling and to build a stable peace for themselves and for their surroundings, so they can engage in normal life issues without worrying for their safety or bare existence. It would be very significant to make people aware of the similarities that most certainly exist among them and to show them that the worst cases and darkest individuals are not all that exists »on the other side«. Even though the degree of crime and number of criminals is great, there are many of those whose humanity could not be destroyed by evil times, and those who never lost the feeling for importance of true human values, truth and justice on all sides. They have kept the integrity of their own national group, not letting it sink into hatred and inhumanity. Even when the light could not be seen, they kept hope that some time peace will inevitably follow, and with peace there will come the security and prosperity that is so necessary to all sides.

Dr. Nebojša Petrović was born and obtained all university degrees in Belgrade, Serbia. He works as an Assistant Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Belgrade. His PhD considered psychological aspects of the reconciliation process in the Balkans. The main area of his research interests include psychological aspects of social and more precisely political phenomena, particularly issues of authoritarianism, patriotism and peacebuilding and reconciliation after intractable intergroup conflict. He wrote two books, and had many journal articles and papers presented on different conferences. He has been guest researcher at University of Vienna twice (founded by OAED program) and now he is visiting fellow at London School of Economics.
Contact: npetrovi@f.bg.ac.yu