



Policy
Brief

**Reconciliation
through
the Berlin
Process:**

the Role of RECOM



The Coalition for RECOM



RECONCILIATION THROUGH THE BERLIN PROCESS: the Role of RECOM

Policy Brief

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FOREWORD: THE RECONCILIATION PROCESS AND RECOM

Nataša Kandić¹

Conflicts on the territory of the former SFR Yugoslavia produced the highest number of victims in Europe since the Second World War. Despite progress in the democratization of post-Yugoslav societies, their membership in the Council of Europe and the prospects of membership in the European Union, relations in the region continue to be burdened by the legacy of war. The process of social reconciliation, as an essential prerequisite for integration within the region, has not been completed, nor will it substantially advance without establishing the facts about the most painful consequence of the conflict - war crimes and victims in relation to wars².

One of the key mechanisms of transitional justice, within which the process of reconciliation is taking place, is the establishment of the facts by the joint commission of the former parties to the conflict, in relation to war crimes and victims - facts that have been burdening relations between and among societies in the Balkans for 25 years now. Regional fact-finding (discovery and truth-telling) aims to prevent political manipulation for personal gain and prevent interpretations that jeopardize cooperation and linking-up. Establishing the facts narrows the production of official narratives that mobilize nationalist policies, and thus facilitates bringing the entities within the region closer to each other, and bringing the region closer to the European Union.

With the aim of regional reconciliation, in 2008, civil society organisations from the entire former Yugoslavia established a regional Coalition, which today includes over 2,000 organizations and individuals. Within it, an initiative has been launched to establish a Regional Commission for the Establishment of the Facts about the War Crimes and other Violations of Human Rights Committed in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia between January 1, 1991 and December 31, 2001 (RECOM). Over 550,000 citizens from across the region have supported the initiative with their signatures, and after a very inclusive, four-year consultation process (during which over 6,700 representatives of civil society took part in 128 debates, including human rights organizations, families of the killed and missing

¹ The author is the Coordinator of the Coalition for RECOM and the founder of the Humanitarian Law Centre.

² The extent of the need for establishing the facts is illustrated by the following fact: in connection with the wars in the territory of the former SFR Yugoslavia, about 130,000 people were killed or went missing in the period from 1 January 1991 to 31 December 2001. By June 2017, the Coalition for RECOM had identified 23,000 victims in connection with the wars of the 1990s and established the circumstances of their death, while the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) had established the identity of about 18,000 war crimes victims.

persons, former detainees, refugees, war veterans, lawyers, artists, writers, journalists and other socially engaged intellectuals and citizens from the area of the former SFRY), the objectives, tasks, competences, duration and procedures of the future Commission's operation have all been formulated. On this foundation, the final version of the Draft Statute of the future RECOM was agreed on by the Special Envoys of the Presidents of the post-Yugoslav countries, including the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

However, in order for RECOM to contribute directly to reconciliation, the initiative itself must receive a political and state imprint. Firstly, the successors of the former SFR Yugoslavia should sign an intergovernmental Agreement on the Establishment of RECOM. To this end, related to the Berlin Process Summit in Trieste in July 2017, 50,000 citizens of Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Pristina, Belgrade and Zagreb, supported with their signatures the proposal of the Coalition for RECOM that the Berlin Process, as politically the most important forum for regional cooperation, should be the platform within which this intergovernmental commission will be established.

The Berlin Process has brought new energy to regional cooperation, given it a strong incentive and launched concrete initiatives. However, no progress whatsoever has taken place with reconciliation, as a consequence of which space remains for the revival of tensions that jeopardize cooperation in the region and its Europeanization. Therefore, the Coalition for RECOM proposes that this intergovernmental commission be established at the upcoming summit in 2018.

RECOMMENDATION

In order to advance the process of regional reconciliation, which is a necessary precondition for cooperation and security in the Western Balkans, as well as for its accession to the European Union, the successors of the former SFR Yugoslavia should conclude the Agreement on the Establishment of RECOM (Regional Commission for the Establishment of the Facts about the War Crimes and other Violations of Human Rights Committed on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia between January 1, 1991 and December 31, 2001) at the forthcoming session of the Western Balkans Summit Series ("the Berlin Process") in 2018; and after that, without delay, they should take concrete steps for the establishment of RECOM, in accordance with the Draft Statute of RECOM.

1

THE BERLIN PROCESS AS A FRAMEWORK FOR CONCLUDING THE AGREEMENT ON RECOM

Ana Marjanović Rudan³

The Western Balkans Summit Series, better known as the Berlin Process, was launched in 2014 as a four-year platform for fostering cooperation between the countries in the region and their integration into the European Union, with the support of the European Commission, international financial institutions and Member States involved in the process⁴. In addition to this, at the time of its emergence, the role of the Berlin Process was to fill the void in the Union's relations with the Western Balkans, which appeared after the institutional and political degradation of the issue of enlargement on the Union's side, and in order to encourage the European orientation of the countries of the region at a time when Europe was facing a multidimensional crisis.

From the outset, the Berlin Process was conceived as an instrument for stimulating reforms that the countries of the region should implement in the context of joining the Union, through initiatives and projects in areas of importance to the region as a whole. At the first Berlin Summit, where this process was launched, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, in the Declaration by the Chair, pointed out that the Western Balkans Summit Series should provide a framework for "real progress" in resolving bilateral issues, reconciliation, enhancing economic cooperation and laying the foundations for sustainable growth - thereby indicating the concrete goals of the Process.

The idea was that projects within the Berlin Process would enhance three dimensions of connectivity in the Western Balkans: the economic, social and political. Each host country at the annual summit streamlined the Process by adding its "mark", and expanding the list of "tasks" for the countries of the region to achieve the overall goals set in Berlin. Thus, within the framework of the Berlin Process, at the annual summits and at the interim events⁵, the topics of regional integration in the areas of transport, energy, economy, digitization, environmental protection, youth cooperation, scientific cooperation, etc. were initiated; as well as the topics of the rule of law, regional security, bilateral issues and reconciliation - albeit significantly less frequently and generally outside of the central meeting.

³ The author is an associate of Western Balkans 6 Advocacy Group and a consultant at Praxis Development Consulting.

⁴ Today, these are Austria, France, Italy, Croatia, Germany, Slovenia and Great Britain.

⁵ Which enabled civil society in the region, youth organizations, business associations and the media to participate in the Process.

Within these themes, the highest number of specific projects and initiatives were initiated in the economic dimension of connectivity, in the field of linking the transport and energy infrastructures; so that, after the Paris meeting, the focus was extended to the connectivity of economies, and then to the fields of digitization and cooperation in science. A much smaller number of projects were launched in the social dimension of regional connectivity, within which, with much delay, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, modelled after the Franco-German model in Europe after the Second World War, as well as the Western Balkans Fund, modelled after the Visegrad Fund. Commanding the least amount of attention was the dimension of political integration, in which the dialogue between Belgrade and Tirana was intensified, and, at the initiative of civil society, the Declaration on Bilateral Issues was signed under the auspices of the Vienna Summit.

With the Berlin Process now into its last year, its continuation is on the horizon with “Berlin Plus”, as well as the ambitions of other Member States to join this initiative; while a summary of the results so far and deliberations on its future are underway. Experts from the region and the European Union rightly warn that the attention being mainly focused on the development of infrastructure and economy (for which there are also challenges when it comes to financing) does not automatically lead to the improvement of security, the rule of law, the solution of bilateral issues and reconciliation, which represent the fundamental problems of the region, and that it was naive to expect that it would. They object to the lack of measures to implement the Summit agreements, and the absence of mechanisms for monitoring progress. A chance is also being missed to inspire the public through better communication to support the reforms necessary for the Europeanization of the region. Moreover, today it seems that “Berlin Plus” will only be a continuation of the previous practice, and that this platform will not be used for the “repolitisation” of the region’s integration into the Union, which would motivate the leaders of the Western Balkans to “compete” in the advancement of the rule of law, in security, in resolving bilateral issues and in the process of reconciliation.

Reconciliation, as a process of restoring peaceful and friendly relations, is the basis of regional security and a guarantor of the sustainability of regional cooperation - which is why it was indicated in Berlin as one of the four goals of the process. However, due to the prevailing “apoliticality” of the Berlin Process, the issue of reconciliation has not been a separate theme of top-level meetings so far. This is odd, since its significance has been highlighted each year in official documents: after the Berlin Declaration, the Vienna Final Declaration of 2015 indicates the gap between the proliferation of structures for regional cooperation and the concrete steps actually taken by the leaders of the Western Balkans towards permanent reconciliation; reconciliation is also mentioned in the Declaration from Paris, which states that it is one of the main goals of the Regional Youth Cooperation

Office (whereby the Process had only indirectly addressed reconciliation); and the Trieste Declaration highlights the link between regional cooperation and reconciliation and, representing the first indication of concrete progress, for the first time recognises the initiative for the establishment of a regional intergovernmental commission for the establishment of facts - RECOM⁶. During the gathering in Trieste, reconciliation, and initiatives for the establishment of an intergovernmental commission as its key mechanism, enter the agenda of the Berlin Process Summit “through the back door”, i.e. within the Civil Society Forum.

In spite of its shortcomings, the Berlin Process has “invigorated” regional cooperation in a way that none of the more than seventy initiatives linking state and non-state actors of social development in the region have previously managed to do. It has succeeded in bringing the political leaders of the region to the same table each year, but also in mobilizing regional initiatives and in setting up the most comprehensive platform so far for regional cooperation between civil society, young people, business entities and of other non-state stakeholders. Therefore, in the coming period, for the Berlin Process to bring about changes in fundamental areas, it must emphasize the political dimension of regional connectivity, in order to boost progress in the rule of law, in security, in resolving bilateral issues and in advancing reconciliation - which are essential conditions for regional rapprochement and for bringing the region closer to Europe.

Perhaps chronologically the first among these preconditions, and certainly one of the explicit aims of the Berlin Process, is the issue of reconciliation. Its key mechanism, in addition to war crimes trials, is the intergovernmental establishment of facts about war crimes and other grave human rights violations related to the wars of the nineties, as well as the establishment of the individual fates of victims and the disappeared; because the establishment of these facts by an intergovernmental commission, as proposed by the Coalition for RECOM, makes it impossible to manipulate the numbers of victims, and prevents these issues from remaining a permanent obstacle to better cooperation in the region.

Being the only one of the objectives of the Berlin Process in relation to which there has been no practical progress so far, reconciliation should not be left off the agenda of the upcoming Summit in the United Kingdom. Not only would reconciliation contribute to political integration, but the conclusion of an intergovernmental agreement on the establishment of a regional fact-finding commission - RECOM - would also be an important and concrete measure in the process of reconciliation in the region.

⁶ Full name: Regional Commission Tasked with Establishing the Facts about All Victims of War Crimes and Other Serious Human Rights Violations Committed on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia from 1 January 1991 to 31 December 2001.

2

WHY IS RECONCILIATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS IMPORTANT FOR REGIONAL AND EUROPEAN UNION SECURITY?

Igor Novaković PhD⁷

The essence of the European project, through all its metamorphoses, has been to ensure peace and security on the European continent. The Western Balkans is in no way different - the process of European integration should bring much needed stabilization and development, as well as institutional and value-based interlinking between the countries of the region and their citizens through the institutions, law and values of the Union. At the beginning of the 2000s, there was a belief that the offer of a European prospect would be sufficient to successfully complete this process. More than 15 years later, despite the promise of the 2003 Thessaloniki Declaration, the European prospect is growing increasingly weaker, and the remaining Western Balkan countries (with the addition of Croatia, which is a Member State), can by no means be called sustainable and stable. Although they are fundamentally embedded in the regional EU-related programmes and initiatives (e.g. CEFTA 2006, Energy Community, etc.), and although they largely conform with EU rules and values, a negative answer can still be expected to the question of “whether the region would be safe if it were not for the EU influence.”

In 2016, the EU published a new Global Strategy, replacing the previous European Security Strategy of 2003. The new document promotes a new, more active approach by the Union to the candidate countries and potential candidate countries for enlargement, as well as to the immediate neighbourhood of the EU, with the aim of supporting democracy, stability, security and peace, in order to help maintain security within the Union itself and in the Member States. The concept which is insisted on is state and social resilience, which is defined as “the ability of states to reform, thus managing to withstand and recover from internal and external crises.”⁸ Strengthening the resilience of the Western Balkan countries is complicated by the fact that all these countries are essentially post-conflict societies, and

⁷ The author is the Research Director of the ISAC Fund, and the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) representative in Serbia.

⁸ *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe - A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy - Translation into Serbian*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, Institute for European Studies, Centre for International and Security Affairs - ISAC Fund, 2016, p. 29 <https://www.isac-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/The-New-EU-Global-Strategy.pdf>

the conflict itself (in its essence) was not imposed from the outside. Consequently, in order to strengthen the resilience of these countries, a successful process of reconciliation in the region is crucial, although it has not been completed to this day. It cannot be expected that any process the EU might wish to encourage, based, as it must be, on the mutual cooperation of these countries, could be fully realized without reconciliation. Regardless of the previous apologies of some statesmen, a glance at the situation in these societies suggests that this goal has not been substantially realized, and that a systematic and comprehensive reconciliation process is needed that would lay the foundations for qualitatively new relations between these countries and societies. In this context, it is particularly important to set up an intergovernmental commission to establish facts about war crimes and other grave human rights violations - RECOM⁹, as the Coalition for RECOM advocates, and which should provide the foundation for overcoming the legacy of the recent past.

What will happen if there is no reconciliation?

We can already see the shapes of such a future in the region. The perception of the other has generally been negative, undermining quality communication and exchange between peoples, and between persons and societies, since the end of the wars until now. The EU influence and integration prospect have helped the Europeanized elites gain influence and make some progress in reforms and stabilisation in some of the countries; however, resilience is still glaringly present, primarily within nationalist circles. Since 2008 and the outbreak of the global economic crisis, the massive withdrawal of Western capital from these countries, with the constant lack of new investment, has opened the door to poverty and the lack of prospects, and then to institutional deterioration and falling standards in almost every aspect of the functioning of these societies. The majority of the countries in the region have become “stabilitocracies”, as Professor Florian Bieber has called them - countries that have an image of stability, but where the fundamental potential for strengthening deep and long-term “resistance” is small. And stabilitocracies feed on, among other things, prejudices towards the other, which is one of the mechanisms for the preservation of power. There are a lot of examples from the last three years on the way such systems function. It can even be argued that the interests in fundamental reconciliation are very limited; although they would not be non-existent, were the prospect and formal process to become a reality.

⁹ The full name is *Regional Commission Tasked with Establishing the Facts about All Victims of War Crimes and Other Serious Human Rights Violations Committed on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia from 1 January 1991 to 31 December 2001*. Under the proposed Statute, RECOM is an intergovernmental commission, an extrajudicial body established to investigate allegations of all war crimes and other grave human rights violations relating to war, to list all victims individually relating to the wars, both civilians and fighters, and to collect data on camps and other places of detention.

In any case, “resilience” cannot be built if there is an imaginary fear of the other. The issue of reconciliation is not exclusively linked to the current political elites - there is also a deeper dimension within each of the countries. The Western Balkans is divided in ethnic and confessional terms, and these divisions do not coincide with the countries’ borders. Many minorities or regions are not integrated, while the countries themselves, in spite of the fact that they have many minorities within their borders, or are based on a complex internal organisation, essentially do not have policies aimed at achieving interethnic integrations. Communities remain trapped in their narratives, while communication is realized only through politicians interested in preserving their power by fostering divisions. These same politicians come to power precisely through their manipulation of real or imagined fronts that are opened between communities.

The absence of reconciliation in the region and of fundamental inter-ethnic integration within the countries themselves, open the way for other influences. These are, above all, the growing influences of powerful third-party states outside the region and outside the EU. These states have been successfully undermining the image of the EU as a successful project for several years. However, they generally have no long-term vision of the region, but only a desire to project their influence and extend it to susceptible groups, abandoned as they are through the absence of fundamental reconciliation. These actors have an interest in, at the very least, maintaining the status quo, as it is precisely this that allows them to maintain influence. Constant instability also enables this influence to increase. Therefore, there is a constant risk that these third countries will finally instrumentalise their influence in order to achieve their own interests, which mostly have little to do with the region. Such instrumentalisation opens the prospects of further uncontrolled Balkanisation and conflict. The only measure that can counter this prospect is the opening of a joint political process of “reconciliation” between the “Western Balkan Six”, in which Croatia, regardless of its EU membership, should certainly participate. This process should accompany the pre-accession processes and regional initiatives such as the Berlin Process (and even become an inseparable part of them). Establishing the undisputed facts about the past is fundamental for reconciliation in the region, and in that sense, the formal launch of RECOM and anchoring it to the Berlin Process would be significant. Finally, the process of reconciliation should be reflected in the internal processes of inter-ethnic integration within the countries of the region themselves. Without reconciliation there will be no “resilience” for this region - no one can count on the stability and security in the region as a given. Reconciliation is obviously not a process that is immanent to European integration, no matter how close it is to it. But it is a step further, a step which would make European integration a long-term success.

3

WHY IS RECONCILIATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS IMPORTANT FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE BERLIN PROCESS ECONOMIC AGENDA?

Jelica Minić PhD¹⁰

During its four Summit meetings (Berlin, Vienna, Paris and Trieste), the Berlin Process focused the major part of its activities on the area of economic cooperation, launching the Connectivity Agenda for the Western Balkans, the Regional Economic Area for the Western Balkans Six, and the Western Balkans Chamber Investment Forum. However, since the first meeting in Berlin, reconciliation has always been present as a topic. It would be inconceivable to build such an ambitious regional economic agenda without it being based on normal communication between citizens, business and professional communities, and representatives of national administrations. Its realization is impossible without the strong political will of the leaders in the region, and without their unequivocal acceptance of the obligations that result from the official declaration of such a will.

Who will benefit from all these new or reconstructed roads, railways, riverways and seaways which the Berlin Process will support through the Connectivity Agenda? Who will use the digital infrastructure and free roaming service, when they are introduced through the action plan for digital integration of the region within the Regional Economic Area? Who will be able to obtain employment freely with mutually recognized degrees, anywhere in the region where demand for highly qualified labour is created within the framework of the mobility programme? Who will study at accredited regional centres of excellence? Who will sell goods where they can best sell them in the region, or invest in a financially attractive location driven by financial value, something that has been worked on for more than a decade by CEFTA, RCC, or, more recently, the Western Balkans Chamber Investment Forum? The main actors and beneficiaries will be the citizens everywhere. All forms of work-education-business communication involve a basic level of trust, a stimulating climate, and the mutual exchange of valid information which is the best medicine against prejudices.

The citizens of the Western Balkans have an interest in liberating themselves from the burden of the recent past in order for their economies, societies, jobs, and families to prosper. Good economic results in the past decade, when the GDP per capita grew closer

¹⁰ The author is the President of the Forum for International Relations of the European Movement in Serbia.

to the EU average by 8.5 percent, spilled over into gradually improving bilateral relations in the region and improving the climate for reconciliation and cooperation. But with the global economic crisis, which seriously affected the EU as the main economic partner of the Western Balkans, the region has seen a decade of economic stagnation and new tensions in the relations between the countries in the region, which have threatened the process of reconciliation as well. The slowing down of reforms, high unemployment, increase in poverty, decline in the quality of education, health care and child protection, have not helped either relations in the region or the European integration process.

That is why the launch of the Berlin Process and its strong orientation towards the economic revival of the region represented a major impetus for this area, completely surrounded as it is by the EU and NATO member states. Everything that has been happening in these two organizations is directly spilling over into the region. Economic recovery in the EU, negotiations on Montenegro and Serbia joining the EU, and Montenegro joining the NATO Alliance, have begun to encourage business people and all citizens to revive and develop their ties in the region.

The Berlin Process has made visible the results of numerous regional initiatives that have for years been helping create the necessary and delicate substance of the regional area of the Western Balkans - the Regional Cooperation Council, CEFTA, the Energy Community, the South East Europe Transport Observatory, the Regional School of Public Administration, the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South East Europe, etc. Their projects have actually enabled the entire structure of the most important initiatives of the Berlin Process to be set up and coordinated so rapidly. These projects, which strengthen regional economic cooperation, the development of businesses, the connection of the transport and energy infrastructures and the improvement of policies in these areas, make the region a promising common market that is more attractive to foreign investment and contributes to the acceleration of its European and Euro-Atlantic integration, especially in sectors where it directly links to the EU Connectivity Agenda. But, while connecting to the EU is an important dimension of the Berlin Process, the regional dimension remains primary. All the above-mentioned agendas, guidelines, projects, and initiatives primarily connect the region within itself, and standardize policies and practices in all relevant areas, thus opening up room for better neighbourly relations and better integration into European macro-regional policies (EU Strategy for the Danube Region, EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region).

With the announcement of 2025 as the target deadline for joining the EU for those in the region who make rapid progress, and with the announcement of the new EU-Western Balkans summit, in Bulgaria during the Bulgarian EU presidency in the first half of 2018, a number of new paths for reviving the region are opening that can facilitate reconciliation. Therefore, this moment should be used to put reconciliation at the top of the agenda of the next Berlin Process Summit. That would mean that an intergovernmental agreement on the establishment of the Regional

Commission - RECOM - should be signed in London, followed by a series of practical steps for its realization as soon as possible. Accomplishing the tasks of this intergovernmental Commission - by establishing the facts about war crimes and human rights violations during the 1990s wars - would alleviate the danger of manipulation by the proponents of different interpretations becoming the source of new tensions. As things stand today, the lack of intergovernmental agreement on these facts remains an unspoken threat to any kind of cooperation, and it also brings into question the long-term effects of the infrastructure and other economic projects initiated within the framework of the Berlin Process.

Fundamentally, since the very essence of the European Union lies in its being the most successful peace project in the world, the Berlin Process is part of a wider peace project for the Western Balkans, and a part of their integration into the EU. It should lead to “the creation of a new model for doing political business that emphasizes cooperation over confrontation, diplomacy over war, and civilian power over military power.”¹¹ This is achieved by cultivating procedures and customs that foster peace, establishing networks of consultations, communications, and gatherings of leaders and citizens in the region, and establishing cooperation as a way of life and the dominant culture of mutual relations.

4

RECOM AS A PRECONDITION FOR EFFECTIVE YOUTH COOPERATION LEADING TO RECONCILIATION

Sven Milekić¹²

By joining the Berlin Process in 2014, the Western Balkans countries committed themselves to strengthening their relations. In this framework, the Berlin Process participants devoted special attention to young people, and especially to regional youth cooperation. Inspired by the experience of the Franco-German Youth Office, established in 1963, the Berlin Process participants decided to support the creation of an even more demanding project - the Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans (RYCO¹³).

The RYCO mandate for action is rather broad, passing into the fields of education, science, economy, culture, but also the topics related to the promotion of tolerance, cohabitation and respect for human rights. As the Agreement on the Establishment of RYCO declares,

¹¹ McCormick, J., (2013) *Why Europe Matters - The Case for the European Union*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, p. 30.

¹² The author is a journalist at the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN).

¹³ Acronym for the Regional Youth Cooperation Office.

the Office aims to support a region in which young people have “an awareness of the past”. Following in the footsteps of the Franco-German Youth Office, which worked on reconciliation and bringing young people together just 18 years after the Second World War, the reconciliation became an important topic for RYCO as well. This dimension of RYCO was developed further during the Trieste Summit, which mentioned reconciliation as one of the three fundamental activities of the Office, along with cooperation and exchange. In addition, reconciliation has been emphasized as one of the most important values of the Berlin Process since its inception in 2014. Similarly, reconciliation has been fundamental to the European Union project from the outset, serving as a foundation for a lasting and sustainable peace after the devastating Second World War.

The Trieste Summit is interesting for the fact that it recognised the major significance of the initiative for setting up a regional intergovernmental commission for the establishment of facts - RECOM¹⁴. RECOM, as a body that will serve to establish the facts related to the fatalities, the killed, the detained and the missing persons during the armed conflicts, will actually play an important role in the processes of reconciliation in the region. As a body with a regional mandate, it is only RECOM that can go beyond the attempts to collect the facts about the armed conflicts merely within the borders of individual countries. For this reason, RECOM has a greater potential for establishing a larger number of facts on the conflicts between the actors within a country, and on the conflicts between the countries. Considering the international character of the conflict, it is actually rather too much to expect from any national commission to establish all the facts about the conflicts, especially about war crimes, when the victims are in one country, and the probable perpetrators in another.

On the path of the Berlin Process, young people ought to be an important component in the connectivity of the Western Balkans region, through joint projects, cooperation and exchange. Although much attention is given to the non-political aspects of cooperation among young people, reconciliation has a role as something that must precede stability and genuine connectivity and cooperation. Certain preconditions, however, must be created in order to achieve reconciliation among young people who did not participate themselves in the war conflicts that are the very reasons for the reconciliation. Long-term and genuine reconciliation in the Western Balkans cannot exist without the facts about the 1990s conflicts having been established. Reconciliation among the members of various national and ethnic groups cannot happen if it is not known what the reconciliation is about. Precisely because they did not participate in the war conflicts or were not even born at the time, young people ought to have access to as many facts as possible on the conflicts. The facts about the war conflicts of the 1990s are indeed missing in the region of

¹⁴ Full name: Regional Commission Tasked with Establishing the Facts about All Victims of War Crimes and Other Serious Human Rights Violations Committed on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia from 1 January 1991 to 31 December 2001.

former Yugoslavia. Given that it is impossible to establish regionally recognized facts within the confines of individual countries, only regional initiatives have the potential for success. In addition to their importance for reconciliation among young people, the facts that RECOM seeks to establish are also important for potential changes in education systems striving for multi-ethnic and/or mono-national interpretations of the recent past. Such education systems are bringing up young generations along ethnic lines, with greater social distances among themselves and a willingness to embrace behavioural patterns of ethnic exclusion. Therefore, if there are no established facts, not only can there be no sound reconciliation among young people, but they are disposed to ethnic chauvinism, and consequently to ethnic populism. The very radicalization of young people, which is what the Berlin Process wishes to stop from developing in the Balkans, is founded on the ethnic populism and religious radicalization that find fertile ground among dissatisfied and frustrated youth, with the presence of a toxic political climate and the absence of a developed economy. In the end, it is the facts that are what make it difficult for chauvinist groups and nationalist populists to manipulate citizens and instrumentalise unresolved controversies from the past.

In addition, RECOM can also be of use to young people as a platform for their further interethnic and international connectivity. Interethnic and international initiatives and youth projects within RYCO can accompany the activities of the future RECOM across the region. Through its public actions, Coalition for RECOM has already demonstrated that it has the potential to mobilize young people, despite the worrying trends across the region, which show an increasing distance between young people belonging to different ethnic and national groups¹⁵. In this way, the activities of young people and of the future RECOM can be mutually complementary.

Considering that the Berlin Process seeks to establish lasting peace, cooperation and reconciliation in the Western Balkans, efforts will have to be made to create the conditions for that. Young people play an important role in this process as the generations without the burden of personal guilt for the conflicts and crimes committed, but who, as the representatives of their own societies, bear the responsibility to confront these conflicts and crimes. Young people need the facts to confront the crimes, and owing to the regional nature of these conflicts, the facts can only be established by RECOM. In that sense, for thoroughly fulfilling the purpose of its existence, RYCO depends on the facts to be established by RECOM. Consequently, the setting up of RYCO and the entire Berlin Process will not lead to a process of reconciliation, stability and cooperation in the Western Balkans, unless the facts are established at the regional level - something only RECOM is able to do.

¹⁵ For more information please refer to: <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/branislava-baranovic-mladi-imaju-vrlo-negativne-stavove-prema-imigrantima-ali-i-nacionalnim-manjinama-1123682>



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