

Interview with Nicolas Moll for “Buka”, 11.8.2015, conducted by Elvir Padalović and Aleksandar Trifunović, published online in B/C/S:

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1. You come from a French-German family. Did the fact that you grew up with family members of different background, historically belonging to the opposite sides of a major war, determine your future call, your interest in reconciliation?

Growing up between France and Germany certainly influenced my interest in relations between both countries, and also in different visions of history, because the visions of the past in France and in Germany are often very different. One simple example: the D-Day in the Normandy in June 1944 was long time in Germany called “invasion” and in France “landing”, and there you recognize already different interpretations of the same event. But I was a long time not so much specifically interested in the topic of reconciliation, also between France and Germany. This is probably due to the fact that I am born in 1965, when the war was over since 20 years and the French-German reconciliation process already well engaged and continuing to progress: This means that I grew up in an environment of positive French-German relations which seemed natural to me and to which I lacked distance. This changed with my first visit in the Western Balkans, in 2001: Being confronted with the post-Yugoslav space shortly after the break-up-wars of the 1990s, and seeing by myself here the direct consequences of the war and the post-war-difficulties, I got much more interested in the topic of post-war-reconciliation, concerning the Balkans, but also concerning France and Germany. And I became much more aware that reconciliation processes are nothing “natural”, which come from alone or fall from the sky, but are difficult and complex processes, depending of many factors, first of all of the will and the energy of individuals and groups to go this way, against existing resistances and difficulties.

2. In your opinion, how much effort is being invested in the process of facing the past in ex-Yugoslavia countries? It seems that this process is more about protocols and public statements than about systematic action...

I don't know many countries where after a war there has been a systematic action of facing the past, in the sense of a comprehensive and self-critical approach involving all levels of the society. Also in Germany, which is today often presented as a sort of super-model of facing the past, facing the past has never been a systematic action, but a process and a struggle: a struggle between attitudes of denial and attitudes of acknowledging the past, and a struggle between different opinions how to remember the past. In former Yugoslavia, we are now 15 to 20 years after the end of the Yugoslav break-up wars, and the forces which are using the past in an ideological and non-constructive way continue to be very strong. But in the same time we have also different actors on different levels which do not agree with these ways of using the past, and which try to go other ways. So in my opinion, the situation is very difficult, but not entirely black.

3. Do you believe there are political forces in BiH or in the region that could carry out such a complex process of facing the past?

Politicians are important to carry out processes of facing the past, but other historical examples show that other actors are also very important: victim associations, grassroots activists, historians, journalists, lawyers, artists and others – and often they have acted before

the ruling politicians and also against them. In the Western Balkans we have since 15 years different gestures from politicians in relation to the past, for example the common visit of Boris Tadic and Ivo Josipovic in Vukovar in 2010. The problem is that these gestures often remain isolated acts. To develop more impact, these symbolic acts would need to be much more integrated in an overall policy which aims consequently to improve the relations between the countries and the communities.

Are the current politicians able to carry out such a process? We will see. Sometimes I hear: “We don’t have a Nelson Mandela or Willy Brandt in the Balkans, so nothing will never change here.” But things can also move without a Nelson Mandela or a Willy Brandt, who, by the way, was elected German chancellor only 25 years after the war, and had to face a huge amount of resistances. Furthermore, I think that it is not helpful for anybody to put the bar as high as Willy Brandt or Nelson Mandela, who both existed and acted in their specific historical context. Bakir Izetbegovic, Mladen Ivanic, Aleksandar Vucic or others do not need to become Willy Brandt in order to change things, they need to find their own ways.

4. One of the important preconditions for reconciliation is the culture of remembrance. What is the culture of remembrance like in the Balkans? It seems to be rather selective...

Yes, the culture of remembrance in the Balkans is selective, but on the other hand: Is there any society whose culture of remembrance is not selective, in one way or the other? As in many other post-war societies, the dominating focus in the Balkans is currently reduced to “our” war heroes, “our” victims” and “their” perpetrators, in short: the culture of remembrance is self-centered and antagonistic, and dominated by ethnonational discourses.

But the culture of remembrance in the Balkans cannot be reduced to this, there are many other attitudes, even if they are not very visible. When I went with a group of history teachers from BiH to visit Trnopolje, the survivor who guided us there began his talk with the following words: “I want especially greet the Serb participants among you ; I know it will not be easy for you to hear what happened here, and I want to tell you that you personally are not to blame for these crimes.” This was a great introduction, because it was not a blaming discourse and illustrated a will of cooperation. This also exists in BiH, and this is important.

What I also find important is that many persons with whom I talk are telling me that they don’t agree with this and this dominating attitude in “their” group in relation to the war. They often don’t want to say it publicly, what shows how strong the dominating discourses are, but that they say it privately is for me already a good sign: It shows that not everything is monolithic and deadlocked, and that there is a space for challenging and changing the current dominating attitudes.

It would be important to express not only privately, but also more publicly diverging attitudes from the dominating narratives and approaches. This also exists, for example through committed persons who are working in NGOs or outside of them, as for example the persons gathered in the informal initiative “Jer me se tice”: they are for example challenging attitudes of denial in Prijedor, but also in relation to places of suffering in other parts of the country where other ethnic groups are the majority, as Celebici and Dretelj.

In order to help reconciliation, I think it is important to develop a culture of remembrance which is strengthening all these other voices, and which goes against ideological statements, monolithic discourses and antagonizing monologues, and which is articulating the will for a more honest, dialogical, constructive and (self-)critical approach of the past, which is allowing hesitations and interrogations. The culture of remembrance, this is not only monuments and commemorations, this is you and me, everybody of us, individually, and how

we speak about the past, and to what extent we are ready to enter in dialogue with others, and also to be self-critical.

5. How much longer are we going to justify the crimes committed by members of ones own ethnic group by pointing at the crimes of "others"? Why is it so hard to deal with the crimes committed by someone "in our name"?

I am a German citizen, and I know that Nazi-Germany has committed horrendous crimes. I am also a French citizen, and I say now: "The French army has committed horrible crimes during the Algerian war." I could add a "but", like for example "But the Algerian independence fighters also committed crimes". Yes, they did, but I am a French citizen, I first have to deal with what my own country did. So, I will not say "but". Just: "The French army has committed horrible crimes during the Algerian war." Tačka. That's what I have to deal with, that is what I want to deal with. Do I have, as a French citizen, to feel guilty, for these crimes? No, I didn't participate in them, I wasn't even born then. Do I feel a certain responsibility related to these crimes? Yes: as a French citizen, I have the responsibility that these crimes, committed by French citizens, are not silenced, but talked about. Am I not allowed to travel to Algeria because of these crimes? Of course not, I can travel to Algeria, and I will certainly feel welcome there and will have a good time there, even more when people there feel that I am open to talk self-critically about the dark sides of our shared history. This will not necessarily be an easy dialogue, but that's the way it is.

Why is it often difficult to talk about crimes by members of our "own" sociopolitical group? Because it collides with our self-esteem and the positive image we want to have and to give about ourselves. And it becomes even more difficult when there is a general atmosphere who tells you that you are not supposed to talk about "own" crimes. But in the same time, what is the alternative? To continue to live with lies and illusions? To continue to be intimidated by dominating, monolithical discourses?

Talking about "own" crimes –including the difficulty to cope with them - is not only the task of NGOs or political forces; here also it is the task of each individual, as did for example Haris Jusufovic with his text "*Hoću istinu šta se desilo sa mojim komšijama Srbima u Sarajevu*". This text got a lot of attention and applause in the RS. Would a text about "*Hoću istinu šta se desilo sa mojim komšijama Bošnjakima i Hrvatima u Banju Luka*" written by somebody from Banja Luka have gotten as much attention in the RS? Very probably not. And this is exactly the problem. Haris Jusufovic also said later in an interview: "*Hiljade ljudi u RS-u je oduševljeno pročitalo moju kratku priču i nadam se da su svjesni da sam želio da im bacim rukavicu. Ok, možete šerovati i diviti se "mojoj hrabrosti", ali i vi treba da progovorite: A gdje su vaše komšij.*" I suppose that this interview is not so much known in the RS, and this is a pity. Everybody has to start to question the narratives of his own environment, and not just to look what the other group is doing or not doing. This is an essential step in order to move forward and not to remain stuck in the past.

6. Is it possible to build something called the Truth on current political and social grounds? The truth about the last war in BiH, in former Yugoslavia, but also the truth about the World War II and others. Everything seems to be taken in fragments here, and selected. New generations seem to be unclear even about who was the good guy in World War II and who was the bad guy, not to mention the war in BiH...

"Truth" is a big word. I found it a good move from REKOM to say we want "to establish the facts" instead of "establish the truth". Establishing the facts is already complicate, but it is

more realistic and less thinking-in-absolute-categories as would be establishing “the truth”. In such a fragmented environment as BiH and the whole region, I think the most important would be, besides and parallelly to establishing facts, to create more spaces to talk constructively about these facts, about the different interpretations of these facts and why we have different visions of history. Is it necessary to agree on one vision of history? No. But it would be essential, for the beginning, to talk more with each other, to start to listen what others have to say, what does not mean that you have to agree with that. But to agree to disagree is also a first step, and perhaps you can also then find some common ground in relation with some topics, despite all differences. And then you can see how to continue. In the frame of this process you can also discuss who are in your eyes the “good guys” and the “bad guys” and for which reasons - although I hope that talking about the past will go beyond dividing the past in “good guys” and “bad guys”.

7. In your publication about "Sarajevo's most known public secret" you talk about Caco and war crimes against Serbs in Sarajevo. Do you feel like there is a veil of secrecy around these issues in Sarajevo?

“Slobodna Bosna” called Kazani already in 1997 “*najpoznatiju sarajevsku javnu tajnu*“, and I chose this quotation as title for my text, because I think it is a good summary of the situation. I arrived in Sarajevo in 2007, and I heard immediately a lot about the siege, but it took me one year before I first heard about Caco and crimes committed against Serbs within the besieged town. These crimes are not part of the dominating narrative in Sarajevo. In the same time, it is also not something which is not known or not talked about within the town. And there have been since 20 years various efforts to talk openly about these crimes and to recognize them: a lot of media reports within Sarajevo, and the initiative, launched in 2011 by Svetozar Pudarić as vice-President of the Federation of BiH, to build a monument on Kazani, are the most striking illustrations of these efforts. This is already no small thing, also compared to other cities in BiH, even if a lot remains to do and that many people in Sarajevo continue to be afraid or don't want to talk openly about these crimes. It would be very important that much more Sarajevians talk more openly about this. These crimes are also part of their history, and not talking about them will anyway not make them go away.

8. What is your opinion about the recent marking of the 20th anniversary of Srebrenica, in the context of reconciliation in former-Yugoslav countries? Who needs such incidents that cast a shadow over such horrific suffering?

It is very unfortunate that this incident around Aleksandar Vučić happened, on the one hand because it overshadowed the whole anniversary and took the attention away from the victims, on the other hand because it allowed nationalistic discourses to spread all around. The incident could have probably been avoided, if the visit would have been organized differently. But it happened, and now it doesn't help to lament about it. Sometimes, such critical incidents can be also a trigger for positive developments. The fact that Vučić invited the three Presidents from BiH to Belgrade was a positive signal after this incident.

Incidents like this can destroy a lot, but not necessarily. I found it also interesting that after the “drone-incident” during the Serbia-Albania-football game in October 2014, despite all the ultranationalist discourses after this event, the cooperation between Serbian and Albanian government continued, and also the talks between Belgrade and Pristina about Kosovo. There is a certain pragmatism which currently seems to exist on the political level, and this is a positive thing. Of course, some doubt about the sincerity of such gestures of reconciliation as now the meeting between Vučić and the BiH-Presidents in Belgrade. But is this really the

most important? De Gaulle did not offer his hand to Adenauer because he was in love with Adenauer, but because he thought that cooperating with Germany was in the interest of France. Politics is about interests, and this is perfectly fine, as long as these politics are also in the interest of the people.

9. A research about ethnic distance in BiH conducted by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung BiH shows that inter-ethnic tensions are still present and that there is no consensus either about the past or the future of this country. If BiH is a micro-Yugoslavia, as it is often referred to, what can we expect in terms of inter-ethnic relations in the future?

I am cautious with historical analogies, they can be useful, but they have also their limits and their dangers. We can see similarities between BiH and Yugoslavia, but there are also differences, and also if we talk about BiH as a sort of micro-Yugoslavia, this seems to imply the thinking “as Yugoslavia has fallen part, so will BiH”. But there is nothing like historic determinism, historical processes are open, and many different things can happen. To come back to the question: I don’t know what we can expect regarding the ethnic relations. This will depend of many things, such as the evolution of the political and economical context. But one thing is sure: without the will to improve the relations, and trying to be inventive in doing so, and without people who actively do something in this sense, there will be no change. Here again, this depends not only of political parties and NGOs, but of each individual and how I act in my environment.

10. Your work is very much focusing on BiH and the Balkans, you have been engaged in projects dealing with reconciliation in this region. We have seen huge amounts of money being invested by the international community in the process of reconciliation in BiH, and, yet, we have not come too far... How do you explain this?

Reconciliation can not be imported from outside. But external actors can contribute, in different ways, so that the society can progress towards a better life and better intergroup-relations. Unfortunately, external actors can also contribute to make things more complicate and difficult. Concerning BiH, the international community has made a lot of mistakes, but it would certainly be too easy to make the international community the sole or main responsible for the very slow development of BiH. Besides that, the international community is, like each group, not a monolithic bloc. On the level for example of international donors for NGO-projects, you have a wide range between smart donors who support civil society actors in a continuous and dialogical way, and stupid donors, which change their priority every year and think that they know the best what is good for the society, without really listening to the people here.

11. France and Germany, after a very turbulent past of conflicts and mutual hostility, were able to build the grounds for what is now the EU. In the Balkans though, 20 years after the war, we are not even close to finding common grounds for the future. Can we use the French-German model and apply it here? If yes, how do we do that?

Each historical case is unique, that’s why I am skeptical concerning the term “model”, especially when it suggests the idea that you may copy-paste something from one situation to another, what works on computers but not with societies. But other historical experiences can nevertheless be extremely useful, they can help to raise questions, develop new perspectives, elaborate new ideas. Even if the situation between France and Germany after 1945 and in the Balkans after the 1990s are very different, there are nevertheless experiences from the French-German reconciliation which can be useful for here. In May this year, at a meeting in Tirana, the Foreign Ministers of the region have announced their intention to develop a plan for a

regional cooperation structure for youth, in order to facilitate and support encounters between young people from the region. This idea is directly inspired by the experience of the French-German Youth Office, which was created in 1963 in order to allow the exchange of young people between both countries, in order to fight against mistrust and prejudices. In the same time, it seems clear that a Youth Exchange Office for the Western Balkans would need to be organized on a multilateral basis, and not on a bilateral basis, as the FGYO, and would need to face the concrete challenges existing today in the Western Balkans. So here is a good example how the French-German experience is not used as copy-past-model, but as an inspiration to develop something by its own. This will be a very interesting initiative to follow in the next months, and I hope that such a Western Balkans Youth Office will really be created. Such regional youth exchange can contribute to fight against geographical and mental barriers, to talk also about difficult topics, and to change perspectives for young people.

12. Do the peoples from former Yugoslavia have a chance to reconcile, sincerely and unconditionally, and prevent any future conflicts in this region?

Reconciliation processes are, as every human process, imperfect processes, and processes which are never really finished. There is no perfect reconciliation, and also between France and Germany, there continue to be problems, what is absolutely normal. Also, reconciliation processes are very complex, depending of many factors, as positive social and economic development. Do the peoples from former Yugoslavia have the chance to reconcile? Of course they have. There is no guarantee for it, but there is also no guarantee for the contrary. The main thing is that everybody tries, on his/her level, to contribute, and also little acts are useful. And then hopefully the situation will slowly improve, even if many problems remain. I don't know if societies need "sincere and unconditional" reconciliation, I am also very satisfied with imperfect reconciliations.