



Bukovica – crime without justice

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After 16 years of this crime, it appeared justice had finally knocked on the door. The senior state prosecutor in Bijelo Polje had filed a request for an investigation against seven people in the Bukovica case, on suspicion of having committed the criminal act "crime against humanity". The investigative actions began and ended with the examination of four witnesses. All seven war crimes indictees in Bukovica were acquitted for lack of evidence on December 31, 2010.

Not so long, 28 years ago, ethnic cleansing took place on the territory of Montenegro. A group of members of the Republika Srpska Army kidnapped several Bosniaks from Bukovica and took them to the Čajniče prison to exchange them for captured Serb soldiers in Gorazde. At that time, eight people were killed in Pljevlja's Bukovica, a dozen were sent to concentration camps, and about a hundred were expelled. Today, less than 200 people live in this place.

Brutal violence took place there and force was used to destroy people, their houses and livestock, property, everything they had. After the torture, the Bosniak population began to move out of Bukovica, after which their houses were looted and demolished.

Apart from paramilitary formations, the then police of Montenegro, jointly with the regular army, did not remain "indebted" to the former inhabitants of Bukovica. Witnesses believe that they succeeded in their daily mission to "cleanse" the region through daily raids and harassment.

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Only the memories of people who saw the harassment of their family, relatives and neighbors with their own eyes remain as testament of time, one of them being Ferid Osmanagić, then nine years old, who still remembers with sadness the harassment of his late father, but also moving to Pljevlja and leaving his native home.

"I don't know if they were police officers, I don't remember, but they started physically attacking my father. Fortunately, a man appeared, the then director of the elementary school "Bratstvo i jedinstvo" Kovacevic, who knew my father and he saved him from being beaten. I also remember some unpleasant scenes, shootings around my village where we lived, in the middle of the day. I also remember the paramilitary formations that passed there the day after the murder of the father and son, Hajro and Ejub Muslić. Looking at what was happening to the others, I was scared. I was afraid for my father, because some people who were more mature at the time were mostly beaten up. We were not able to find the name of the perpetrators, who attacked my family in those days, but they were probably from Montenegro, because most of the army and police were from Montenegro at that time (Pjevlja, Niksic). We came to Pljevlja in December of 1992, to my father's brother, where we spent the next 6 months. After that, we started a new life," says Ferid.

"In that Bukovica, there will never be happiness"

When asked if his late father ever returned to Bukovica, Ferid said that he did not want and remembers the words of his late father, when he said: **"In that Bukovica, there will never be happiness."** This was his second time, unfortunately, he had to leave Bukovica. He left for the first time during the Second World War.

After all, situation in Pljevlja, Ferid says, was not much better either to feel safe.

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"During the night, 5, 6 private shops were burned, mostly of Muslim owners, arrests of members of the then SDA party, beatings. Life at that time was not perfect there either. For what reason did we choose Pljevlja: firstly because we knew we had safe accommodation, the second reason was that at that time there were a large number of Muslims in Pljevlja, 7,000-8,000, and if something happened, we knew that at least it would be heard out because it is the city center, while in Bukovica the situation was different ", explains Ferid.

Searching for weapons as a pretext for raids and harrasment

Ferid adds that all the raids were under the pretext of searching for weapons, although that was not the task of the then army and police, but to secure the border. He believes, like some other former residents of Bukovica, their real task was to clean up the area through which it would be convenient to smuggle weapons and supplies for the needs of the Republika Srpska army.

At one of the party conventions in 1997, the current president of Montenegro, Milo Djukanovic, then the Prime Minister, admitted that he helped the Republika Srpska during the war and stated the following:

"Let Momir Bulatović not protect the Serbs from me, because the Government I lead had to secretly help the Serbian people in Herzegovina and Republika Srpska from Slobodan Milošević and Momir Bulatović for years, when they decisively and heartlessly lowered the border ramp," Đukanović said in front of thousands of his supporters.

<https://www.facebook.com/LiberalniSavezCG/posts/2582194028745255>)

It is interesting that there were testimonies that have not been proven that the former director of the Police Administration of Montenegro, Veselin Veljović, participated in raids and harassment of citizens, then the commander

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of the Pljevlja police, which secured Bukovica. Today, Veljović performs the function of advisor for defense and security of the President of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović.

In 2019, Veljovic told CIN (Center for Investigative Reporting) that he did not rule out the possibility of individual abuse of office by a police officer, but claimed that the police were "a factor of stability, peace and order and intervened in all cases where houses were raided for illegal possession of weapons or in connection with other reported committed criminal offenses.

"None of the police officers who took part in those raids beat, abused and mistreated the people whose houses and facilities were raided, none of the residents of Bukovica complained to me about the work and behavior of the accused police officers ... It is clear to the police that S.H. hung himself, not out of fear or because he was beaten by the army and the police, but for reasons known only to him, " Veljovic said at the time.

We asked Hazbija Kalac, president of the Justice and Reconciliation Party, how he commented on the non-prosecution of those responsible for the crime, but also the role and responsibility of former police director Veselin Veljovic in the persecution of Bosniaks from Bukovica, but also later in prosecuting those responsible.

"Have you ever heard of an example of a person responsible for a crime prosecuting himself?" It was illusory and naive to expect the perpetrators of that ethnic cleansing to prosecute themselves. This is not only the case with Bukovica, but also with the terrorist attacks and occupation of Pljevlja, the deportation of refugees from Bosna and Herzegovina, the arrest and torture of Bosniak political representatives in Montenegro and many other crimes from that time" answers Kalac adding that Veljovic is only one in the chain of command responsibility.

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He is just one in a chain of command. Filip Vujanović was the Minister of Justice at that time, Milo Đukanović was superior to both Veljović and Vujanović. Veselin Veljović was the commander of the special police that was engaged in Bukovica at that time. There are numerous testimonies about the torture of the Montenegrin police against the residents of Bukovica, and among others, Veljović is directly accused of torture. The more correct question is how his former position contributed to the relativization and covering up of crimes, " says Hazbija Kalac

Return without justice is impossible

In the period from 2007 until today, the Government of Montenegro has built 108 prefabricated residential buildings and about seventy auxiliary buildings as part of the Bukovica reconstruction project. The total value of the project was about four and a half million euros.

-The houses were built and that's fine. However, in my opinion, project was done wrong. The government estimated that the construction of these houses would solve everything. However, when you look at the road infrastructure of Bukovica, it is a despair. When you look at the electricity supply, the first snow or a stronger wind, the whole of Bukovica is without electricity. You look at the mobile network, it is very difficult to get a signal there. This should have been done first and gathered all the people who are in the mood to return there - explains Ferid Osmanagić.

Ferid emphasized that, after so many years, people cannot be expected to return just like that.

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-After 1992, everyone ran away and everyone started new lives. Some new generations have arrived. They could not expect people to return to them just because of their houses - he said.

After 16 years of this crime, it seemed that justice had finally knocked on the door. The senior state prosecutor in Bijelo Polje had filed a request for an investigation against seven people in the Bukovica case, on suspicion of having committed the "crime against humanity". The investigative actions began and ended with the examination of four witnesses. All seven war crimes indictees in Bukovica were acquitted for lack of evidence on December 31, 2010

Hazbija Kalac believes that the former government did not sincerely implement the program for the return of the inhabitants of Bukovica because those responsible were not punished, and the inhabitants were not provided with basic living conditions.

"The orderers and perpetrators of the crimes were not punished, they were not even named, so the preconditions for the return of the expelled never took place." It was all done again with a plan. The victims have been manipulated all these years, additional pressure put on them in order to be satisfied with the houses that the state built for them. The construction of houses without additional infrastructure and additional support, payment of certain monetary reparations to the injured is a direct confirmation of the state's responsibility for crimes and along with undisguised protection of criminals represents a school example for legalizing crimes of ethnic cleansing, "claims Kalac.

What is the path to the revival of Bukovica and the return of its population?

Hazbija Kalac believes that it is possible, with political will, for the exiled families to return, those responsible to be punished, and the villages to be revived in the following way:

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"To bring the orderers and perpetrators to justice and to punish them adequately. To treat Bukovica as an area of special interest to the state by building infrastructure, to provide state support to residents who wish to return for farming, small businesses, tax exemptions... There are many modalities to encourage a return to this extremely resource-rich area. But above all, those responsible for the crimes must be punished. That is a precondition for everything" claims Hazbija Kalac.

However, Ferid Osmanagić is not an optimist, he does not believe that the state will do anything to change things because there is a lack of political will. "Victims and families have lost faith in the state and its justice because it is difficult now, after so many years, to prosecute those responsible, many victims, witnesses and perpetrators are no longer in this world, so as time goes on it is harder to expect justice to reach those responsible " in Ferid's opinion.

There is little talk and knowledge about Bukovica

We often hear stories in public about crimes that took place outside Montenegro, while many have not heard of Bukovica. Our interlocutors find causes in covering up the crimes, thus are rarely mentioned.

Ferid says that 98% of young people from Pljevlja do not know anything about Bukovica, while the situation with older people is somewhat better, but again most do not know the details of the crime.

When asked if he thinks that there is a lot more talk about other crimes outside Montenegro, while there is no talk about Bukovica, Kalac said that it is true.

„Srebrenica, the biggest Bosniak wound, our denominator for the genocides that have happened to us in the past 150 years, is a symbol of our suffering,

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but unfortunately that wound began to be abused for daily political purposes on one hand and diverting the public's focus from crimes in Montenegro. It is not normal or moral to be silent about the crimes whose victims are your fellow citizens, neighbors, compatriots and to deal with Srebrenica every two or three days. Bukovica is also our Srebrenica. In 1943, Chetnik hordes led by Pavle Đurišić killed about 8,000 elderly civilians, women and children in a month, among other things in this area, of which 26% of the victims were children under 4 years of age. And that is our Srebrenica, which happened in the 1942 and 1943 of the last century and which largely went unpunished. That is why Bukovica of 1992 and 1993 happened to us. That is why we have an obligation as people and society to first of all clean the garbage from our yard "concludes Kalač.

On the other side, Ferid considers that Bukovica and other crimes must become part of school curriculum in order not to be forgotten and repeated.

Apart from our interlocutors, we contacted the Bosniak Party with the same questions sent to the Party of Justice and Reconciliation. After many promises and reminders, we have not received any answers for 20 days.

We also wrote to Veljovic, who referred us to the documented statements he has already given regarding the Bukovica case.

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