

Regional consultation with non-majority communities on the Initiative for RECOM

A regional consultation with representatives of non-majority communities held in Skoplje was attended by 50 participants from the entire region of the former Yugoslavia. The gathering was opened by Gordana Duvnjak (Coordination Council of the Coalition for RECOM, member from Macedonia), Ratko Gajica (National Parliament of the Republic Croatia), Shaip Kamberi (president of the municipality of Bujanovac, Serbia). Nataša Kandić (Humanitarian Law Center, Serbia) was one of the speakers and the consultation was moderated by Boro Kitanoski (Peace Action, Prilep, Macedonia). Macedonian and Kosovo news media reported from the consultation.

Opinions, Suggestions, and Recommendations of the Participants

It is necessary to adopt a law on missing persons in all states of the region. RECOM should help the nations of the former Yugoslavia to interpret [recent] history in a unified manner.

If you look at textbooks used by school and college students in the Balkans, you will see that they are presented with the same facts but different interpretations. For example, if the fact is that the Balkan Wars began in 1912, and that the Serbian Army entered, let's say, Skoplje, the connotation of that fact in Serbian historiography is completely different from the Macedonian interpretation. Liberation or renewed occupation? (...) I can't say that those things are the causes of the war, but they certainly present a fruitful soil for the kind of conflict that happened recently in the former Yugoslavia. The Initiative for RECOM is therefore indispensable. (...) Another thing, I think that a law on missing persons should be adopted. That is the most painful issue, not only for the families of the missing but also for the entire society. The same law should be adopted throughout the territory of the former Yugoslavia. I agree that the law should provide an option for sentenced war crimes perpetrators so that their sentences can be reduced if they provide information useful for locating mass graves or for solving the fate of the missing. (Nexhmedin Spahiu, RTV Mitrovica, Kosovo, Regional consultation with non-majority communities on the Initiative for RECOM, Skoplje, Macedonia, January 29, 2011).

The essential question is what led to the fact that the people who were expected to be normal and responsible could create such havoc and commit such horrendous crimes.

I honestly believe that the region of the Balkans can be a "normal" environment, where we can have a responsible approach to history and that history will not be manipulated with for political purposes. In order to achieve that, and in my opinion that is the idea of RECOM, we have to learn the facts. We must not be afraid to point a finger on those who committed crimes, regardless of they are in power and whether they come from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sandžak, Croatia, etc. Generally, the Bosniak National Assembly gives its support to RECOM. Also, I would like to know if RECOM is going to research the causes and the consequences. I think that is the most essential question to answer – what led those who were expected to be normal to cause such havoc and without any sense of responsibility to commit such horrible crimes. (Samir ef Tandir, Bosnian Cultural Community, Prijepolje, Serbia, Regional consultation with non-majority communities on the Initiative for RECOM, Skoplje, Macedonia, January 29, 2011).

All states in the region should adopt the same law providing for identical criminal processing of all war crimes perpetrators.

... when it comes to this very sensitive issue that has been bothering the entire region for almost two decades now, it is clear that a solution must be found soon. The Initiative for RECOM needs a much broader support of the civil society. (...) Now, the question we must answer is whether we can have a joint platform for creating equal conditions for criminal processing of war crimes perpetrators and identical sentencing criteria. War crimes trials are still being conducted routinely, while I believe that they should be given more importance in terms of demonstrating the fact that war crimes perpetrators are brought to justice. I think that in such an atmosphere it would be good to have a law that is identical in all states. Do post-Yugoslav states have the laws with unique elements of justice when it comes to this kind of problems? It can create problems if one state accepts one set of criteria, one platform, then the rest of the region is under a certain amount of pressure to accept it. (Riza Halimi, member of Parliament, National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, Preševo, Serbia, Regional consultation with non-majority communities on the Initiative for RECOM, Skoplje, Macedonia, January 29, 2011).

Organ trafficking cases should be part investigated by RECOM.

Each crime must be condemned, including organ trafficking crimes. I haven't heard anyone making that suggestion. That is a horrible crime. (Ivana Cvetković, National Council of the Macedonian National Minority, Leskovac, Serbia, Regional consultation with non-majority communities on the Initiative for RECOM, Skoplje, Macedonia, January 29, 2011).

We have to be very persistent because this is not going to be an easily accomplished.

I think that RECOM is our future and this Initiative should enjoy as much support as possible. This is not going to be easy because all of the things that happened need to be carefully examined and clarified and that's the hard part in this region. However, we need to continue doing that and we need to persevere. Maybe not very soon, maybe not in two years, but it will all have to fall into place sooner or later. (Stojanča Arsić, Municipal Assembly Bujanovac, Bujanovac, Serbia, Regional consultation with non-majority communities on the Initiative for RECOM, Skoplje, Macedonia, January 29, 2011).

How do we initiate the question establishing responsibility for burnt homes, persecution, intimidation, and mental and emotional suffering in Sandžak?

We need to establish responsibility for crimes that have not been investigated so far, even for individuals who have been sentenced already. In some cases, some people have even been promoted or otherwise rewarded for the fact that a series of extremely heinous crimes happened in Sandžak. Those crimes have never been processed. Also, no one in the Balkans has ever been held responsible for mental and emotional suffering. How do we tackle the issue of killed souls, persecution, burning of homes, etc.? It is quite obvious that victims are not only those who died because we have a history of repression and intimidation in Sandžak. Some 17,000 people were either criminally processed or taken in for police interviews. What do you make of the fact that the people responsible for abusing and forcefully relocating the residents of Sandžak still live right next to us? (Redžep Škrijelj, Bošnjačka Riječ, Novi Pazar, Serbia, Regional consultation with non-majority communities on the Initiative for RECOM, Skoplje, Macedonia, January 29, 2011).

We must find a way to make politicians accept the establishment of RECOM.

One of the goals of this Initiative is to achieve reconciliation. Since reconciliation itself is a process that will take a lot of time, I think that we cannot expect our national parliaments or the so called political elites to reach a consensus on this issue without the influence of the international community. We have to find a way to approach the public and once the public has a favourable sentiment with respect to this idea, the public can influence politicians who will not change their policies, which are not the same policies that led to all of this and these are not the same politicians who led to all of this. (Mato Groznica, Croatian National Assembly in Vojvodina, Serbia, Regional consultation with non-majority communities on the Initiative for RECOM, Skoplje, Macedonia, January 29, 2011).

How can we win over members of majority communities to talk about the crimes committed by individuals belonging to their own communities?

We have mostly talked about crimes committed against members of our own minority communities. However, no one so far spoke about the crimes committed by members of our community against members of other communities. (...) But the question is how to motivate a member of a majority community to speak about the crimes committed against members of minority communities? We have to find instruments to motivate those people to talk. In Bosnia and Herzegovina we have a specific problem: in one area, or even one street we are a majority while in the next we are already a minority. (Smajil Žlibanić, Association of Citizens of Gradiška, Gradiška, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Regional consultation with non-majority communities on the Initiative for RECOM, Skoplje, Macedonia, January 29, 2011).

We have to conduct an inquiry into possible crimes committed by members of Roma population.

I would like expert people to conduct an inquiry into possible crimes committed by Roma people on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. I would like to have a finger pointed at any Roma person guilty of committing a war crime so that we can too, like other communities, admit that we have also committed crimes. I want to find out if we caused other people to transgress against us and I want to know what we did wrong. So, at this point, we don't have any information on whether the Roma people committed war crimes. I didn't conduct any investigation personally and I don't know if anyone else did. (Dervo Sejdić, the Council of Roma People in BiH, Sarajevo, BiH, Regional consultation with non-majority communities on the Initiative for RECOM, Skoplje, Macedonia, January 29, 2011).

We should pay special attention to those who testify against “their own” perpetrators.

There is a young, dedicated man, Blaž Stevović, from Trebinje, who testified against members of his own community and he ended up being excommunicated from his own community. Now it is very difficult for him to be re-socialized. It is hard to imagine that you can motivate someone to testify against the members of their own group without providing sufficient protection mechanisms. (...) Are there any such mechanisms at the international level that we can use since it is obvious that the ones we have locally are insufficient? Maybe that ought to be investigated further and maybe organize a consultation on this topic. (Senad Nanić, Cultural Society of Bosniaks in Croatia, Zagreb, Croatia, Regional consultation with non-majority communities on the Initiative for RECOM, Skoplje, Macedonia, January 29, 2011).

Media outlets are crucial for creating a positive climate for the establishment of RECOM.

I believe that in order to change a climate in any state it is necessary to secure the cooperation of the media. Without the media the Initiative for RECOM cannot be successful. I am not being sceptical, but I really think that without the support from the media it will be much more difficult to achieve our goals. (...) If this Initiative is not present in the media and if the broad public is not familiar with the Initiative, it will not be possible to change anything. (Michael Spevak, Association of Montenegro-Slovenian Friendship, Podgorica, Montenegro, Regional consultation with non-majority communities on the Initiative for RECOM, Skoplje, Macedonia, January 29, 2011).

Countries aspiring to join the European Union membership should demonstrate a high level of respect for human rights.

So, we should create this commission and select the candidates who are willing and capable of doing the job in a transparent, honest, and proper manner. They should be fairly selected candidates, not mine, not yours, or somebody else's. In that respect, I support RECOM. (...) RECOM needs to be established and given credibility. The RECOM Statute is probably done by people who are trying to make it as good as possible. If there are any major objections to the Statute, it can always be improved to be better. But, the thing is, I would insist on joining the European Union but under clear conditions: human rights, human rights, human rights. (Mile Marčeta, Association of forcefully displaced residents of Drvar municipality, Bosna and Herzegovina, Regional consultation with non-majority communities on the Initiative for RECOM, Skoplje, Macedonia, January 29, 2011).

RECOM must be careful to collect precise information in order to avoid manipulations.

It is quite clear to me that we need to have both first and last name, date of birth, and father's name in order to document that Mitar Mirić, was killed in such and such village of the Drvar municipality. Why? Because I know that some lists are being made today, and this is common knowledge, according to which a number of Serbs were killed in a village along the Drina River, but it later turns out that they died of natural causes. We must do absolutely anything in our power to avoid that. (Fahir Gutić, Cultural Society of Bosniaks in Slovenia, Ljubljana, Slovenia, Regional consultation with non-majority communities on the Initiative for RECOM, Skoplje, Macedonia, January 29, 2011).

There were many examples of people saving their fellow countryman belonging to other nationalities.

I know that there are many examples of people who saved members of other nationalities during the war and those people are neglected. They should be mentioned as often as possible as positive examples because many families were saved at the last moment by someone from a different ethnic community. There are many such people and we should just look for them so that we can take their statements as well as the statement of those who were saved. (Radomir Mičić, Democratic Initiative of Serbs from Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Regional consultation with non-majority communities on the Initiative for RECOM, Skoplje, Macedonia, January 29, 2011).