

Conflicts, security and justice in intercultural context of Serbia

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Executive summary

About the research

During 2013, the Victimology Society of Serbia conducted an empirical research study in order:

- To find out how people from multiethnic communities in Serbia deal with interethnic conflicts in their everyday life;
- To identify problems and positive experiences in solving interethnic and other related conflicts;
- To analyse how victims are treated, how the security is perceived by the citizens and what is the place of restorative approaches in dealing with conflicts and security.

The research consisted of two parts: **qualitative research** and **a quantitative survey** on interethnic relations, existing micro-level interethnic conflicts and ways of dealing with them by citizens in the three multiethnic communities in the border regions of Serbia (research sites):

- Bac/Backa Palanka (Vojvodina)
- Medvedja (South Serbia)
- Prijepolje (South-West Serbia).

The research had a strong **action dimension**.

Research methodology

Within the qualitative research, the data was collected through **qualitative interviews** with 17 persons from NGOs and state institutions in the research sites (ten Serbs, three Albanians, three Bosniaks/Muslims, and one Croat).

The basis for the methodological approach in collecting data about victimisation and conflicts in the quantitative part of the research was a **victimisation survey**.

The survey was conducted on the **sample of 1423 persons**:

- In Medvedja - 243 (63.6%) Serbs and 139 (36.4%) Albanians;
- In Prijepolje - 304 (49.8%) Serbs and 306 (50.2%) Bosniaks
- In Bac/Backa Palanka - 346 Serbs (80.3%) and 85 Croats (19.7%).

A **respondent-driven sampling** was used bearing in mind the social context of the post-conflict society.

Main findings of the quantitative study

Prevalence and characteristics of victimisation

- **383 (26.9%) respondents suffered some form of victimisation** in the period from the 1990 until the time of the survey.
- A total of **1367 victimisation incidents** were reported.
- The most frequent forms of victimisation were: insults (17.8%), threats (11.9%) and inability to realise ones rights (10.7%).
- Most victimisations were interethnic.
- Two-thirds of respondents experienced victimisation more than once (re-victimisation), while one third experienced victimisation only once.
- The biggest proportion of victimisations occurred **during the 1990s**, coinciding with armed conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, while the smaller part occurred after 2000.
- Respondents from Medvedja answered to be victimised most often compared to the respondents in Bac/Backa Palanka and Prijepolje.
- Male respondents were victimised in greater number in comparison to female respondents.
- Respondents over 60 had been victimised more often in comparison to the younger respondents, but we have to take into account that they spoke about different forms of victimisation they had experienced while they were younger (during the 1990s).
- Albanians most often answered to be victimised in comparison to the respondents from other ethnic groups.
- The majority of the victimised respondents (66.5%) looked for assistance and support after the victimising incident and tried to solve the consequences of the victimisation, which speaks in favour of victims' agency.

Feeling of security/safety

- 88.7% of respondents reported feeling safe in their communities at the time of the research.
- Most of respondents (52.4%) feel safer today than during the 1990s, while a third feels the same.
- Victimized respondents reported feeling unsafe nowadays more often than those who did not have such experience. Moreover, victimized respondents

answered feeling less safe during the 1990s than nowadays.

- In comparison to the period before 1990, 32.7% of respondents answered that they felt the same, 26.6% more and 20.9% less safe today.
- The survey findings confirmed the existence of different aspects of safety: physical, economic, legal, social and political (un)safety.
- Inefficiency of the state in solving problems and economic factors were seen as the greatest contributors to respondents' feelings of insecurity.
- Economic measures (more jobs), more communication between people about problems and various ways of increasing efficiency of the state were recognised as the best measures for increasing safety.
- Victimised respondents do not support severe punishments for those who endanger the safety of the citizens significantly more than those who did not have such experience. Thus, it seems that respondents give more importance to restorative and social than to retributive measures as possible ways of increasing the safety of citizens.

Mechanism suitable to achieve justice

▪ Both restorative and retributive measures were recognised as solutions that may bring justice in cases of interethnic conflicts in which the respondents were victimised:

▪ Punishment composes 25.3% and mechanisms of restorative justice or restorative approaches 71.6% of all the answers about mechanisms suitable to achieve justice in the concrete cases of victimisation.

▪ In addition:

○ 53 (13.8%) respondents with the experience of victimisation consider a punishment as an only mechanism suitable to bring justice in the victimising event they described;

○ 129 (33.7%) respondents opted for both punishment and one or more restorative approaches as complement mechanisms suitable to achieve justice;

○ 179 (46.8%) respondents opted for restorative approaches only.

▪ Respondents already use different restorative approaches, particularly dialogue and informal mediation, for solving every day problems.

- Respondents' answers prove to open the space for the broader use of restorative approaches in cases of victimisation where the power imbalance exists.

Interethnic relations

- One fifth of the respondents had talked to someone about interethnic relations in their community during the year prior to the survey.
- More than a half of them discussed this issue in a constructive and positive way: how to improve interethnic relations and what would be possible ways to resolve and overcome interethnic conflicts.
- There is a high level and frequency of interaction of respondents with people of different ethnic group, although some differences between research sites were noticed.
- The best ways to improve interethnic relations include: more interaction and conversation, tolerance and respect for diversity, and overtaking social measures for prevention of conflicts.

Conclusions

- Different conflicts existed or still exist on different levels in all three research sites, including conflicts between citizens, and conflicts between citizens and the state (i.e. state institutions and state's representatives).
- Although most conflicts experienced by the respondents were interethnic, the survey findings also suggest that not all the conflicts between members of different ethnic groups are intercultural.
- Conflicts with the state have a prominent place, which is tightly connected to the non-functioning or inadequate functioning of the state and the lack of rule of law, which is immanent for the post-conflict societies.
- Citizens' perception of security goes much beyond physical safety; it also encompasses social, economic, legal and political safety.
- Citizens' notions of justice are equated with both restorative and retributive or legal justice.
- Respondents attributed high relevance to both formal and informal restorative approaches, also suggesting their need to actively participate in the process of conflict transformation and the increase of security.

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