

## LET'S BUILD PEACE, HERE AND NOW: JELANA MEMET, ANITA PANTELIĆ AND GALINA MAKSIMOVIĆ

*The fourth conversation in this series presents a dialogue between three peacebuilders in the Balkans Jelana Memet, Anita Pantelić and Galina Maksimović. It is moderated by Barry Knight and highlighted themes of identity, narrative and the continuation of war by other means.*

*This is an abridged version of a longer discussion which involved other participants who joined the session.*

**Barry:** Serbia is a country very close to my heart. I worked there during the war, with an organisation called Anti-War Action and we're going to have three great presenters today from that country, people on the frontlines of conflict. But first I'm going to turn to Rasha Sansur of the Dalia Association in Palestine who is also a member of the Foundations for Peace network, our hosts for today, who will say a bit about Foundations for Peace.

**Rasha:** Thanks Barry. Foundations for Peace (FFP) is an international network of independent local philanthropic organisations, like the ones speaking today. We are all local activist funders, and we play a vital role in delivering and sustaining peace building through a social justice approach, because we believe that any peace without social justice is temporary. We focus on local knowledge because people who are directly affected must have a say in how they transform the situations they are living in and we act as the bridge to create this relationship between local communities and wider peacebuilding work. So, through this series Let's Build Peace Here and Now, we're trying to influence the global agenda by highlighting the stories of local activists who work on the ground.

**Barry:** Thank you. This initiative is also part of the Shift the Power movement. We believe that those people who are in the thick of the action do not get enough profile or enough resources, and we're trying to change that. We're going to hear from three main presenters, but this is also a participatory session and, after we've heard from them, we'd really like to hear your views, your thoughts, your questions. We're looking forward to the kind of session in which we listen to each other carefully and we speak to one other softly and we all commit ourselves to learning. Galina, could you tell us a little bit about yourself and your work.

**Galina:** Thank you Barry. I work as the Programme Coordinator for the Reconstruction Women's Fund in Serbia, which was founded by activists who worked as part of the feminist movement at the intersection of anti-war movement. We still exist even though we officially live in peace – and today, I want to talk about how it is living in a post-conflict society. I must really really say a really huge thank you to FFP, because this is a subject that is hardly ever discussed.

What I want to highlight is how the wartime economy shaped the economy of today, and even to suggest the idea that the economy is a sort of continuation of war. During the 90s, Serbia participated in several wars, which were part of this larger process of the break-up of Yugoslavia. One of the reasons for that was the economy, because the republics making up Yugoslavia were on different levels of economic development. Kosovo, for instance, was highly underdeveloped, Slovenia was on a different level. So the economic inequalities were in the roots of the conflict.

During those wars, all of our republics still officially lived in a socialist system, but at the same time, the first privatizations of strategic companies was happening, and that is how the wealth of today's elites was built. Most of the factories bought at the time were bought for not much money, so it was all about connections and personal influence and the biggest companies, the biggest employers today, their money originates from war-profiteering. What was also happening in the background of the war was a black economy, people who went to war at weekends typically, stealing goods - mainly refrigerators or TV sets and electrical goods - and re-selling them at home. That's also how some start-up capital was accumulated, and it also makes up a significant portion of today's higher-middle class wealth.

After the war, we started transitioning to capitalism and to democracy, and it's a never-ending transition. We don't really feel much of democracy or anything positive right now because, as I've said, some war-like elements persist. The privatization of resources that started during the wars continued in the early 2000s - these are the times that I remember as a child - but they were also a time when many of these privatized factories started to go bankrupt. The workers typically worked for many months without wages. This was really a widespread phenomenon, it happened to my family members as well. And to continue this parallel between regular war and economic war, let's just say that both wars produce death. In an armed war, death comes quicker, in this economic war, it's a slow painful death.

So in the early 2000s, what was happening was that workers were left without wages, pushed into poverty, and many of them could not afford to feed their families. There were some traces of resistance but because the trade unions were weakened, there was nothing much that could be done. So we had a whole wave of workers committing suicide, or sometimes protesting by cutting their finger or an arm, protests that were harming them more than anyone else. There was a lot of homelessness during these times, too. At some point that stopped, because the economy turned in favour of foreign investors, but again, the labour law also serves foreign employers more than the workers. So, again we have the situation of the economy working against the workers.

Also what any sort of war needs is 'the enemy'. Now, we officially do not have an enemy state with which we are at war, yet the situation and the atmosphere of actually being engaged in a conflict remains and this is maintained through public narratives and production of the 'otherness', of some sort of imaginary enemy. All

sorts of minorities in Serbia are marginalised and portrayed as the other and all sorts of conflict narratives are produced to keep people divided. These are the narratives that fuel anger and nationalist feeling, which keeps people in a state of hostility. So we have this continuous state of conflict, or we act as if we are on the verge of the conflict, and this is what shapes our daily lives. To add more fuel to the fire, the governments adopt a militarist stance, buying weapons, and publicising it in the media. It's like a demonstration of power. At the end of the day, this is what makes people passive about other things that they should have agency over, such as their labour rights, their economic rights.

There is a lot of nationalism, and that's rooted in the 90s, which is in a way easily explainable because, as Yugoslavia was breaking up, the republics that took its place were losing their identities. In Serbia, we rebuilt ours and most of our new identity was based on a nationalist mythology that was mainly rooted in stories about Kosovo. Since Kosovo declared its independence, that narrative became stronger than it was before, and some new myths have even been produced and they are treated publicly as if they are ages and ages old.

All of these practices combined cover up that we are economically in a really poor condition, that there is a constant war on the poorest members of the society, and this prevents them from uniting for direct struggles to achieve their rights.

**Barry:** Thank you very much Galina for setting that context. Now we're going to turn to two people who are actually on the frontlines of the conflict, and in some interesting ways. We're going to start with Anita, and her story of how despite a kind of long history of women's resistance and participation in local emancipatory movements, their efforts are often overlooked. She's going to talk about the continuity of female local resistance, so over to you Anita.

**Anita:** Thank you Barry. First, I want also to talk about our historical context, because I think it's important for this topic as well. The Balkans has a turbulent political history. Since the middle ages, we've had dilemmas about 'is this area west or east? Should we adapt to western values and the system of political and economical organisation, or should we adopt eastern models?' and these dilemmas still persist.

Our societies have never completed the modernisation process, either politically or economically and it is still the source of constant dispute, as well as the cause of lack of democracy, the polarisation of society, and lack of substantial public dialogue on all painful issues of the past and of the present, which are very relevant to our topic, women's peace activism. This general context is reflected at the local level because women's peace activism is a matter of political positioning, which is often very risky, because it involves advocating for a universal right to peace - not just my peace, and peace in my country, but peace for all. The role of peace activists understood in this way is often in conflict with regime policies which look very restrictively at the concept of human rights, as well as the right to peace.

In the city of Kruševac and in Rasina district which are the centres of the national myth of Kosovo, which celebrates heroism and also glorifies the tradition of war, it is very difficult to speak critically, and to think and act contrary to established narratives because these are something the majority wants to hear. But, we also have historical episodes, which are not myths but facts - the ones we are not so comfortable with and proud of, the stories from the wars in the 90s, that we want to erase. Peace activists in Serbia are pointing to these places in our past that we need to confront and rethink. This courageous direction was initiated by women in black, during the 90s, during the wars in Serbia, and after some years, these critiques of war and of the regime spread throughout Serbia, including our city and an association of women, called Sandglass, was formed to pursue this kind of anti-war activism. When we formed the Alternative Girls' Centre we also accepted these views and we also advocate for peace.

I want to mention two examples, one is from the 90s and one is from World War II. When the bombing of Kosovo began, women in our city started a wave of anti-war demonstrations, demanding the end of the war and the return of their husbands and fathers and sons. After some time, these occasional demonstrations took on a wider dimension and became a demonstration to change the Milošević regime and to campaign for democracy. It was a very risky thing to do, because the regime was an authoritarian one and those who opposed it were branded traitors. But these brave women went on protesting and after the war ended, Sandglass started an initiative to rename the square where they took place the 'Square of Brave Women', to show that there is a space for this kind of memory in the city, and that anti-war demonstrations are also important to local history and the politics of remembering. But, this initiative fell on deaf ears, which shows how the history of women's local peace activism is being suppressed or ignored.

The second example I want to mention concerns the partisans in the Second World War. This war is still subject of many disputes in our country. A minority of the public still clings to the political ideals of communism and Yugoslavia. But, with the disintegration of Yugoslavia, an independent Serbian identity was affirmed and its supporters have invested very little in a culture of remembrance of Yugoslavia. Numerous monuments were totally neglected and in a very systematic way because they did not fit into the new image and direction of the country.

A couple of years ago, me and my colleagues, quite by chance, came across a monument dedicated to two young partisans who were killed in the struggle for dominance between these two movements during the war, but since their story does not fit into desired social and patriarchal models, their biographies have been suppressed. So, we made an information board about them and placed it in a prominent local spot so that there is some monument to them. That was our personal attempt to intervene in local historical memory because we really believe that this part of the emancipatory process which was started with the partisans is very important even today. We also continue the anti-war tradition of women in this area, protesting in the streets against wars, and showing solidarity and concern for peace as a universal human right, regardless of nation, gender, skin colour or any

other consideration. We are very proud of what we do because it's not easy to do it in such small cities in such a context.

**Barry:** Thank you, Anita. When I was listening to you, my mind ran to Marcus Garvey and his comment that people without knowledge of their history, origin and culture are like a tree without roots. It's really important that we take a historical perspective on peacebuilding and I think I'm quoting Avila Kilmurray who is on this call, that often conflicts take a long time to get into and an equally long time to get out of. The causes of violence run deep and long, and therefore the processes of peacebuilding run deep and long, too. It's wonderful that you're actually addressing this on so many fronts, but keeping those memories alive is a really critical thing, particularly as history is typically written by the winners.

We're going to turn to the role of young women, and Jelena is going to talk about how small steps contribute to peacebuilding through organising a feminist spring school, with young women from Serbia and Kosovo. Chandrika has already commented in the chat about how what you describe connects with the Mothers of May movement in Brazil for example. Similar patterns occur across the world.

**Jelena:** Thank you Barry! We started the Feminist Spring School in 2014, so it's been running almost eight years now. It started when Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation invited Serbian young women activists and young women activists from Kosovo to have a meeting in Split, Croatia and in those three days of discussions, we realised that, because of the war and the political situation, we had no connection, although we live geographically very close to one another. And although other feminist activists, anti-war activists in the 90s, were all connected in spite of the war and closed borders, and no form of telecommunication, they cooperated, they communicated, they found a way to help each other to protest the war. But we didn't know each other, and it seemed like our generation was left out of this kind of cooperation. That was when we decided to organise a feminist school, so that we could renew our friendships and sisterhood, and work together towards building peace.

The beginning was very challenging since we didn't know each other much, and it took time to build trust and to have good communication. The first time we organised Spring School in 2014, we organised it in a neutral place in Macedonia, because we were still afraid that it would not be safe to meet in our own countries. We had one week of great discussions and time together where we built some new friendships and cooperation, and we've organised it every year since.

Our values in the school are based on feminist principles, and there is zero tolerance of nationalism or any other type of discrimination. We didn't want to make this school something didactic where you come to learn about feminism or peace, but to have young women activists who want to speak together, to learn together about themselves and about the other, to bring them closer together, to make them break prejudices about each other etc.

We put the accent on women's experience in war, and how all women suffer the same, no matter what country they live in, they are all victims of violence in the war, but also in the peace. The history of the anti-war movement is very important to us and, every time, we bring our feminist 'mothers', feminists who started the anti-war movement in the 90s, to speak about their experience, about their sisterhood, about how they helped each other, how they helped refugees, about how neither borders, nor wars stopped them from doing that. We also want to have the kind of dialogue that brings out all the emotions we have by connecting to our experiences and what we feel about each other, so it is sometimes very cathartic to be at these workshops and they are full of tears.

What is also challenging is the constant fear of conflict that is maintained by our governments through mainstream media and we learn through speaking to girls that mainstream educational systems also show only one side of the history of both countries - the one that suits them. So at first, they are very shy, but after some time they learn more about each other, and they leave with totally different perspectives. This is why the dialogue is crucial for peacebuilding.

Besides this we also organise many other activities with the girls who come to Feminist Spring School. One of them is storytelling. We ask all the participants of Feminist Spring School to write some of their story, what is peace for them, and what inspired them to become peacebuilders. We have already published one collection of these stories and we are about to publish. We also organise joint activities. The girls from Kosovo and Serbia create some joint activity like feminist teaching or artistic workshops, to bring them closer together and learn about each other. In these ways, we want to break the barriers that this political situation imposes on us, and to help peace building.

Many of the young women who came to Feminist Spring School became active in other organisations and they also cooperate among themselves, so we hope that we have succeeded at least in making the barrier between Kosovo and Serbia smaller and bringing this dialogue to a point where we will have some future together.

**Barry:** Thank you, Jelena. I was put in mind of the fact that, when I was working with Anti-War Action in Serbia in the mid 1990s, it was women who were on the front line. Women in Black in particular was a very powerful anti-militaristic force and it's good to see that that tradition is still there. And of course, it's a common phenomenon across war zones that women will often be the first peace activists and are out there in ways that men are often reluctant to be.

#### *Discussion*

**Barry:** I think we're coming to the end. I'm going to start with Jelena, and then move to Anita, and then to Galina, and then I'm going to turn over to Chandrika to say what's going to happen next. So first of all Jelena, any final thoughts?

**Jelena:** Thank you, Barry it was really fruitful to hear other people's comments and the questions as well, and I think we should have more conversations like this.

**Barry:** We're conscious that we're at the beginning of this process and we do want to build on this so thank you for helping to make such a good conversation. I'm going to go to Anita now.

**Anita:** I want to mark that we all should be awake in these times because there are so many tools of propaganda which Rasha mentioned, that we really have to be very careful with the news we receive, and be critical towards it.

**Barry:** Galina, over to you.

**Galina:** Thank you. What has been said multiple times in this session is that women are leading the struggles against wars and against militarism. I will just remind us that it's not just because women are left alone during the wars because the sons and the husbands are at the battlefields, it's also because women are victimised in wars through sexual violence mainly, which is also a war weapon. So women do not have a choice about being there at the front. Our power comes from really deep struggles, but it's a power, and it's always step by step, and we live, we work, we hope.

**Chandrika:** Our purpose through this series is to get these stories of local people out because we really believe that local peacebuilding is what sustains peace and that is where the transformation really happens. So we want to get these narratives out and to populate them with this kind of language, these kinds of strategies that involve emotions and acknowledge sisterhood and friendship and the role of women and feminism, and so many other things.

We've had previous sessions on storytelling and on the value of equality and justice, and another session on the role of women with Dawn Shackels and Basma Kodmani. So we're having the conversations transcribed, the transcript will be cleaned up and we'll produce blogs on the topics they raise, and eventually when we've got maybe 15 to 20 of these sessions (this is our fourth) we hope to produce deeper analysis, an anthology of these stores, so this is building up towards that.

So we'll continue with these dialogues, based on demand, based on need, based on the generosity of people and what they want to share - maybe it could be about how to mitigate propaganda, or how to be just and sensible in the face of propaganda, or maybe it could be another session on women's organising. If you want a specific topic that local peacebuilders deal with to be addressed, then you can write to Rasha or me and we'll get in touch with you.

Thank you all for joining today and thanks, above all, to our speakers. Goodbye.

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