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Peace and Conflict Resolution in the Balkans Practicum

Reflection Paper-"Identity, Fear, and the Politics of Conflict in the Balkans"

Opening Remarks-On Conflict, Political Theory, and Humanity:

Conflict is a very complicated thing. Many political theorists have attempted to define conflict, but their answers are often oversimplified, even after years of dedicated research and book-writing. When Karl Marx spoke of conflict he did so largely in economic terms. This led him to some compelling arguments, but he largely brushed over cultural issues and human beings as being something that exist only as part of an economic system "superstructure". His theories simply don't place enough emphasis on culture or other factors besides economics as a driving force behind human actions. On the other hand, some more recent political theorists have based the blame for conflict on culture almost exclusively. Samuel Huntington, for example, wrote a powerful and engaging book entitled "The Clash of Civilizations", in which he projected that all future conflict would be defined by cultures, particularly a religious aspect of culture. This theory, while also compelling and seemingly prophetic in many ways, sees culture as the single catalyst behind conflict. It also, therefore, does not comprehensively address the issue by instead choosing to focus on one aspect of it. The dichotomy between these two very different political theories which deal with an overall idea of "conflict" exposes a major weakness in Political studies. Theories are just theories. Theorists like to develop theories for a reason, because it helps us to define the world we live in and to understand how it may or may not work. But in my experience, I have not seen a political theory which has managed to universally explain all human interaction successfully. This is because conflict (and other issues of politics) are not just based on economic conditions or cultural divides or any other one set of variables. Conflict is complex. It is a wicked problem. The politics surrounding the problem of conflict constantly shift, adapt, and evolve over time. They do not have fast, easy solutions or simple definitions that are constant over long durations. They require us to learn iteratively, from both our successes and our mistakes, to slowly do away with the aspects of human society that hinder it, and slowly build up the aspects which advance it. Why is this? I propose that this is because the problems of politics are also problems based on the decisions of the world's most unpredictable animal, human beings. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in our quest for clean answers and easy solutions, this accounting for *humanity* as a core variable in political theory (which aims to define how *human* societies form and interact with one another) is often ignored in favor of "systems" like economies which can be more easily defined. But if we are ever going to move beyond the current state of human societal interaction and find lasting peace, we must develop long term strategies to create real change over time based on an understanding of our shared human experience, and we must consider that in carrying out the practice of politics, we are dealing with interactions with, amongst, and between human beings. Therefore, our thoughts on how to deal with the problem of conflict should not be bound by the artificial confines of some mechanical economic superstructure or other cold, detached political theory. Our plans should consider what it means to be a sometimes irrational and emotional human being, and our strategies should focus on understanding these human variables which are admittedly harder to

define but are the only factors that are truly involved in all forms of politics put into practice. What makes us human? How do we define ourselves and the "other"? And how is this question of human identity used to influence political systems?

Like conflict is a complicated area of political theory, the Balkans are an equally complicated area of the world. For this reason, they are, perhaps, the perfect place to study the roots of conflict and how it can be resolved, managed, or prevented. The region has been historically tumultuous, the epicenter of countless wars and struggles for power, reflected in its fortress walls and the intentionally preserved hollow buildings which serve as a reminder of past wars, destruction and atrocities.   The powers that be tried to find an easy answer after the fall of Yugoslavia and grouped several new countries in the region into what were seen, generally, as ethnic nation-states. Like academic theories of Politics and their oversimplification and broad generalizations of how society works which I discussed previously, the world created theories which oversimplified the Balkans to find a fast answer to a problem that is very complex.   This is a region of multiple ethnicities, multiple cultures, multiple belief systems…things which borders and the modern "state" quite frankly can't contain. It is also a region made up of people and the political systems they create through their interactions, systems which contain all the elements of human nature ranging from total greed to pure benevolence and everything in between. In short, the Balkans are a perfect microcosm of the complexity of human interaction in political society, an interaction which is almost always contingent on some form of identity which is used as leverage.   The politics in the Balkans illustrate the issue of human nature and identity as a complicating factor in our understanding of politics, and more specifically conflict.

With the above in mind and as a lens for my thought process, in the following series of journal entries and analysis from my travels, I will attempt to assess my growing understanding of the historical conflict and tenuous peace that exist in the Balkans. Then, upon reflection of what I have learned through my travels, I will attempt to reach some conclusions for further analysis. Finally, utilizing those conclusions, I will try to conclude this document by accentuating parallels or points of difference in comparison to conflicts in other parts of the world, specifically East Asia and on the Korean Peninsula, my area of focus in my studies at the Middlebury Institute. Through all of this, I hope to develop some ideas for how we might approach the idea of conflict, and politics in general, from this human lens. Perhaps if we can begin to understand each other better as human beings…what drives us, motivates us, unites us, and divides us…we can find more effective ways of influencing the *human* politicians who drive our political systems and inspire our contemporary political discourse. Since they are human, and driven by human nature, they also require an identity, one which they use to build their legitimacy. If we can understand how this works and how they maintain their power in the overall political discourse, perhaps we can find ways to use this understanding of human nature and human identity to shift the discourse towards ones that are less divisive. Then, maybe we can begin to move human society closer to true peace, one small, mutually beneficial step at a time.

Day 1: March 17, 2018; Belgrade Serbia

Our first morning on our first day in Belgrade began with a short walking tour of the city, focused largely on the historic Belgrade Fortress. This fortress is an iconic symbol of Serbian and broader European history, built in the years of the Roman Empire as a frontier defense against "Barbarian Central Europe" in the late 3rd century AD. Since its original construction it has served both as a defensive, operational fortress in a variety of wars, and more recently as a museum or cultural heritage site. Over its lifetime, it has been Serbian, Hungarian, Ottoman, Bulgarian, Byzantine and more, in no specific order. This identity crisis is a testament to both its crucial strategic location at the confluence of the Danube and Sava rivers, and to the tumultuous history of the region of modern-day Serbia. If one was to have observed this area alone for the past two-thousand years or so, one could witness the rise and fall of empires, and would witness the changing of territorial ownership countless times because of nearly constant conflict and war in the region.

After concluding our walking tour, we continued onward to observe a brief Muslim prayer at Bajrakli Mosque in Belgrade, and then met with the Mufti of Serbia, Abdullah Nu'man, to have a discussion on identity, politics, and the religious component of the human image in the Balkans. Tensions between religious groups, and the complexities of national identity as opposed to citizenship (the Mufti doesn't participate in groups outside of Islam or vote so as not to be aligned politically) both became topics of discussion. This visit began to highlight one of the struggles of these so-called ethnically aligned states in the Balkans, and that struggle is such that in ethnically Serbian Belgrade, with a population of over 80% Orthodox Christians, a small but significant minority of residents are Muslim. They, along with other cultural minorities in Serbia, are Serbian according to their passports, but they are not Serbian in the cultural, religious sense. This complicates their relationship with the majority Orthodox Christians in the country and makes the quest for equal treatment under the law and the dream of living in a truly multicultural, democratic state a difficult one.

Finally, we had two academic discussions with leaders of past and present opposition movements in Serbia. First, we met with Srdja Popovic, former leader of the youth movement "Otpor!" and current leader of the Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies. Then, we met with the leaders of the "Women in Black", a feminist, antimilitarist group focused on protesting discrimination against women as well as minorities considered "different" ethnically. The common theme from both meetings was that our observations and discussions from earlier in the day with the Mufti were part of a broader context of political corruption and dishonesty in Serbia. The systems in Serbia are not supporting minority populations adequately, are not enabling effective communication between the government and the people and are fueling tension between cultural groups who previously battled for control during the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s. The government operates largely in secrecy, transparency in the media and information broadcasting systems of the country are at an all-time low, and nationalistic xenophobic ideologies are on the rise.

With that said, the real complication these political opposition groups are dealing with does not seem to be systematic one at its root. The system which works against the Muslim

community and other minority populations in Serbia and impedes progress towards a truly open, democratic state is a symptom of a larger human issue. Human beings in power tend to want to hold onto that power. Though leaders change, and they may talk of compromise and progress, in the end they often do what is in their personal best interest as a means of retaining power….and often that means doing whatever necessary to maintain the "status quo". To that end, the current president of Serbia, Aleksander Vučić, is regarded as somewhat of an authoritarian reincarnation of former leaders like Slobodan Milošević, and is seen by many as using a variety of tactics to promote a discourse which is culturally Pro-Serbian and reigniting tensions that had been simmering for the past couple of decades after the fall of Yugoslavia. He is a former Serbian Radical Party member, as well as former Information Minister for Slobodan Milošević. He is a product of the power politics which caused the Yugoslav Wars. And now, though he has changed parties to a more liberal sounding Serbian Progressive Party, and he has half-heartedly admitted wrongdoing for alleged war crimes committed by Serbia in the Yugoslav Wars, these opposition leaders who we met with today don't believe the man himself has changed. The underlying ethnic tensions in the Balkans are a tool which the politicians of Serbia have been able to use to unify their people behind them while promoting division with their neighbors. They have perhaps not created, but neither have they worked enthusiastically to change a cultural discourse of fear of the "other" or "outsider" which is once again spreading in Serbia. They likely have some understanding that a more optimistic political tone would be in the greater interest of the Serbian people and the larger regional community. However, human beings have self-interest, and politicians are human beings. Because changing the cultural discourse would undermine their personal grip on political power, in their own human self-interest, they don't. They choose the status quo. The problem is that the current discourse is one based on fear which, if unchecked, could lead to a resumption of the nationalistic wars which devastated the area in the 1990's. The question then becomes, if the politicians in power won't change the discourse unless it suits them, and the odds are stacked against the opposition in forcing the politicians' hand, how do we get to true and substantive change that leads to politics which promote peace instead of tension? How do we affect the human dimension in such a way that the politicians' self-interests change to be more in line with the best interests of the people? This will be a question I intend to research more fully as the trip continues.

   <u>Day 2: March 18, 2018; Belgrade, Serbia</u>

      Our visits today began with a trip to Sukkat Shalom Synagogue in Belgrade, the last remaining synagogue in what was once a vibrant Jewish community. The synagogue is rather small and unimposing, but so is the Jewish community in Belgrade. From a former population of 12,000 Jews prior to WWII, after the atrocities and war crimes which were carried out by Hitler and an acquiescent regional government at the time under the command of Milan Nedić, most of the population were murdered or fled. Though at the outset of the war in Europe the Yugoslavian government tried to remain neutral, after the region was conquered and Nedić was put in place as a puppet ruler of Serbia by the Germans in 1941, the situation for Jews in Serbia rapidly grew worse. To gain the trust and support of his masters and likewise improve his own

political position, he helped facilitate one of the most brutal and efficient exterminations of human beings in history. With his support, the Germans who occupied modern day Serbia were able to declare that the region was "Jew Free" by the end of 1942, one of the earliest declarations of that troubling status by any region under the Nazi occupation. According to our tour guide today, there are now less than 1,000 Jews in all of Serbia, largely because of the events which occurred under Nedić at that time, and the Sukkat Shalom Synagogue is the last active Synagogue in Serbia. Despite these irreconcilable atrocities, there are still those today who defend the man as a misunderstood hero of sorts. Slobodan Milošević actively campaigned to improve the reputation of Nedić, and since his time in power, many Serbian textbooks still treat the Nazi collaborator as someone who was simply "trying to save Serbia from a worse fate" (Ramet & Lazić, 2011). Because the modern-day Serbian government has incredibly broad control over the media in the country, this message of Nedić as a tragic hero is largely consumed by the Serbian people without any reasonable way of opposing it.

After leaving the synagogue, we travelled to the House of Flowers, a memorial to the late Yugoslavian leader, Josip Broz Tito. He seems to be somewhat of a mythological figure now in Serbia, since he was able to keep the now independent Balkan states unified under one government with relatively little conflict for over 30 years of rule, and he managed to project the image of Yugoslavia as a better, less oppressive form of communism than some of the alternatives at the time. However, in retrospect, his methods for maintaining that control were not so different from the ones used by Slobodan Milošević and his peers in more recent times...he was just able to apply those methods more broadly across former Yugoslavia.

> "Tito's Yugoslavia was based on respect for nationality, although Tito ruthlessly purged any flowerings of nationalism that threatened the Yugoslav federation. However, the contrast between the deference given to some ethnic groups and the severe repression of others was sharp. Yugoslav law guaranteed nationalities to use their language, but for ethnic Albanians the assertion of ethnic identity was severely limited. Almost half of the political prisoners in Yugoslavia were ethnic Albanians imprisoned for asserting their ethnic identity" (Josip Broz Tito, n.d.).

Tito may have been successful in maintaining a semblance of control over former Yugoslavia, but it seems fear and nationalism were his primary tools for doing so. In that sense, his reign was simply a slightly more peaceful precursor to the cultural discourse of fear which caused the Yugoslav wars. And though he was able to maintain control over his people and retain his own power, once he died the conditions he left created a precedent which his successors would emulate to rally their people behind them at the expense of greater division in the region. This led in the long term to further conflict and war amongst the former regions of Yugoslavia.

Finally, we met with two more leaders of civic movements in Belgrade, this time meeting with Maja Stojanvic of Civic Initiatives, and then Nemanja Stjepanović from the Humanitarian Law Center (HLC). Civic Initiatives is a movement focused on building capacity for groups who want to seek civil change. The Humanitarian Law Center, on the other hand is working on researching and compiling/analyzing data on war crimes committed during the Yugoslav Wars,

and then seeking honesty and justice for those crimes. Both groups are trying to influence the government, one in terms of general human rights, and the other in terms of the messaging related to war crimes committed during the Yugoslav Wars. But as we have discussed previously, in their own self-interest, politicians generally won't openly admit the truth of war crimes or change their positions freely because it undermines their legitimacy in the eyes of their people...and risks the possibility that their individual power may be diminished. Instead, they label HLC as anti-Serbian (an example of the politics of fear and self-preservation) and marginalize other movements that might undermine their political power if allowed to grow. Furthermore, Mr. Stjepanović also asserted to us that the Government controls the media and flow of information to an extent that makes it difficult for non-government groups to influence the opinions of Serbian people through traditional means. How can his group use their analysis to sway public opinion if they have no way of distributing it through mainstream media to the people? The challenge is a momentous one, but perhaps it is not impossible.

The politicians in power won't change their position substantively until they feel their power or legitimacy is threatened. So, since the messaging and policies are unlikely to change from the top due to the human tendency to want to maintain the status quo while in power, the interested parties must find a bottom-up approach which they can propagate if real change is the goal. Only if a substantial enough portion of the population begins to unite against the government will the people in power consider changing their positions as a means of preserving their power. No matter how authoritarian a regime may be, it cannot survive without the will of its people. Fear is an easy tool for politicians to use, and its ease of use makes it incredibly tempting to those in power. But the only way fear as a tool works on any level is if the people believe it. At the end of the day, if the people aren't afraid, the people in power can't use fear to manipulate them. It may not be a fast process, but it begins with a shift in the hegemonic discourse like these groups are trying to provide.

Day 3 and 4, March 19th and 20th, Pristina Kosovo:

On day three of our journey we made the long journey over narrow village roads to Pristina, Kosovo. Immediately upon arriving in the region it becomes apparent that a change has occurred. For one thing, the infrastructure is still lagging that which we observed in Serbia. But, arguably more significant for the purposes of this journal and reflection is the immediate shift in the cultural dynamic and the human element that is driving the people who reside here. Serbia was approximately 80% Orthodox Christian. Now, driving into Pristina, one can immediately notice the large number of Mosques dotting the city on every other block or two. This may seem like a minor detail, but it exemplifies the point that Kosovo, while still disputed as to whether it is a unique country or a region of Serbia, is indeed a bit different than its immediate neighbor to the north. Rather than ethnically Serbian people (who still make up a significant minority in Kosovo), most of the population here is ethnically Albanian.

Our first order of business in Kosovo is a brief walking tour of Pristina with a local guide. She takes us through a few small neighborhoods and leads us to the Kosovo Ethnographic Museum. Once there we receive a tour of a small, traditional house which Is being used as both the museum and the main exhibit while a nearby facility undergoes renovations. The house is one of the few surviving relics of the war in the 1990's and houses some traditional Albanian artifacts and tools. While on the tour the guide explains to us some of the history of Kosovo, highlighting that indeed the majority of Kosovo Albanians identify as Muslim, many of those people do not actively practice religion. However, the times are changing, and for a variety of reasons, some Albanians are beginning to return to more traditional religious practices, partially as a response to repressed religious identities which were a part of the Communist policy of secularism which was encouraged during the Yugoslav years, and partially due to recent outside influence from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other Muslim countries who are spending money to reinvigorate the city's old mosques and Islamic heritage.

Finally, we walk to the area of Pristina University, Kosovo's only large public university, and we observe a unique feature of the area, a newly built Catholic cathedral. Our guide informs us that this construction is part of an effort by the government to send the message that Kosovo is not just a Muslim country, but in fact a country of many religions. This is a seemingly admirable message for the government to send to its people, who are, regardless of official policy, living in a multicultural region. However, one must wonder if it is anything more than just a symbol when the Serbian minority population and other minorities in Kosovo are largely living separately and in relative isolation from the rest of the country's people. Strangely, in the same area, an unfinished Orthodox church remains standing as well, but it has not been finished since the end of the Yugoslav wars. It sits in a status of disuse and emptiness across the way from the new Catholic church and the hundreds of local mosques. This incomplete Orthodox church sits on the same ground as the national University, and a cold darkness emanating from its unlit, unfinished interior perhaps epitomizes the feeling of inevitable foreboding that lurks under the surface in Pristina.

After completing the walking tour, we receive a lecture from a local professor of humanities and advocate of women's rights at Pristina University. She, like many of our other speakers so far on this trip, lived through the Yugoslav wars in the 1990's. So, she provides us with some valuable insight that reinforces some of the trends we have seen so far in this trip. She tells us that the wars which took place between Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo are often characterized as wars between the ethnic groups in the region. Based on our observations from today, it is easy to see why many people would think this way but explaining the cause as a clash of cultures is just an oversimplified way to explain a much more complex situation. At their heart, these wars were wars fought by politicians seeking to maintain or grow their influence, who used culture and religion and ethnicity as a tool to rally their people behind them.

When the Yugoslav wars began in the early 1990's, Slobodan Milošević had already forcefully united 4 of the 8 Yugoslav territories behind him by replacing their representatives with people loyal to him. In the final days of Yugoslavia, it had an eight-vote presidential

system, in which each of the republics had one vote. With Milošević controlling four, he already had an extraordinary amount of power over the political decisions of the presidency. In a bid to centralize Yugoslavia behind him, he used these four votes to try to marginalize the say of the other republics and create conditions which would essentially allow him to be a "new Tito", with all of Yugoslavia united behind a dominant Serbia. This, understandably, was not taken well by the leaders of the other republics, who then over the course of the next few years began to declare independence from Yugoslavia in a bid to maintain their power and resist the dominance of Milošević. These declarations were not taken lightly by Milošević, who ordered his armies to maintain the unity of Yugoslavia by force…beginning with Slovenia, and then also in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. These wars splintered the once united Yugoslavia, and reignited lingering ethnic tensions which existed in the region, but the war was not caused by ethnicity or religion. It was caused by politicians seeking power and utilizing their influence to manipulate systems in their own self-interest. After the wars began, the leaders of each of the various republics followed Milošević's example and used their inherent majority ethnicities to rally people behind them either in support of their defense, offense, or other military operations. Encouraged by their respective leaders and media, Serbians blamed the others for seceding and destroying their unified Yugoslavia, while the republics (and their majority ethnic/religious groups) on the defensive blamed Serbians for their aggression. This effect grew and metastasized over the course of the wars, utilizing an existing but previously peaceful division between peoples, and then weaponizing it and shaping it into a war and persistent source of tension which still permeates the region to this day.

How did the weaponization of culture shape politics in the Balkans? Is a sense of individual identity as part of a sustainable, peaceful community feasible in the long term without conflict, or will politicians and those in power always use it for their own gain? These questions, I believe, directly tie back to the observations I made in Belgrade. Politics, at their root, are based on human beings. Human beings are complex; they want to belong and to have an identity; they are generally tempted by power and will manipulate others to maintain power if necessary. Politicians used their power in the Balkans to turn people who had lived side-by-side for decades against each other. Capitalizing on ethnicities and religious affiliations which people identify themselves by, they weaponized culture to rally their populations behind expansionist, self-serving goals which started with Milošević's quest to unite Yugoslavia behind his leadership and the "Serbian people". To do this, they instilled the culture of fear which we discussed on our trip through Belgrade, capitalizing on their peoples' desire to maintain their identities; through utilizing a manmade culture of fear based on identity, they pushed their agendas. Fear of the "Serb" or the "Croat" or the "Bosniak", etc. etc., all of whom used to on at least one level simply be "Yugoslav", allowed them to unify their respective republics behind them while dividing the Yugoslav territories apart into the battlefields of a bloody ten-year conflict. How can we prevent situations like this from occurring in the future, in areas of the world at which similar conditions may already be present? I hope to be able to answer this question more fully by the end of the trip.

Day 5 and 6, March 21ˢᵗ and 22ⁿᵈ, Dubrovnik Croatia:

To get to Dubrovnik from Kosovo we drove through the territories of Albania and Montenegro, and finally up the Dalmatian Coast. The drive was a long, beautiful one through a variety of mountains filled with rivers and lakes finally leading to the western coast of Montenegro. Driving through these countries was not significant in and of itself other than for their physical beauty, but it did also reinforce the religious and cultural divide which Kosovo represents between majority Eastern Orthodox Serbia and the rest of the region and helped to further demonstrate that these countries are all at a historical crossroads which has seen the influence of a variety of empires and regional powers throughout history including the Ottoman Empire, Byzantines, and modern day Western Europe, Greece, and Turkey among others. Arriving in Croatia late at night, this point is once again reinforced as the landscape is dotted with less and less mosques, and more and more Roman Catholic churches.

We began our time in Croatia by meeting with another activist group called DESHA, an NGO which focuses on advocating for women's rights and equality among other things. Like in other areas of the Balkans, women in Croatia are generally unable to achieve the same pay, status, or opportunities as their male counterparts, and this organization conducts training and holds demonstrations to change the discourse related to women in Croatia, among other things. Though their platform is admirable, what struck me most about this group was their planned, strategic approach towards achieving their long-term goals. The representative of the group who spoke with us emphasized that it is not enough to simply protest injustice. To be effective, a group like this must sustain itself, strategically plan its approach, and maintain a constant vision of the outcomes they want to achieve. Oftentimes, activist groups get so caught up in activism that they become reactionary, and simply protest when things they perceive as an injustice are committed. To change the discourse, DESHA is operating a two-fold organization, one which educates, counsels, and empowers women, and another separate on which they use to raise money to fund the growth of their organization and their platform. The hope is that this will enable them to rely less and less on external donors and funding over time and will also allow them to focus more precisely on the areas that they determine to be important rather than having to cater to the will of said donors.

Next, we conducted a walking tour and met with representatives of the Catholic Bishop in Croatia, and the Imam for the Islamic community in the region. The walking tour was unfortunately a bit truncated due to cold wind and heavy rain, but we were still able to walk through the old city of Dubrovnik and witness its majestic city walls and gates and ornate cathedrals, and to learn a bit about the history of the city. Most relevant to our trip and the city's modern history relates to what, in Croatia, is referred to as the defense or siege of Dubrovnik in the years 1991-1992. During this time, the old city was under constant bombardment from Yugoslav People's Army forces and was defended by a handful of mixed-ethnicity residents who took up arms to protect their city. It was carried out to prevent the cessation of Croatia from Yugoslavia and was a prelude to future conflicts which would occur along similar lines later in the 1990's as forces loyal to Slobodan Milošević would attempt to maintain the integrity of the disintegrating Yugoslavia by any means possible.

Next, we met with representatives of the Catholic Archdiocese and the Muslim community in Dubrovnik. Here, we learned about what is being done by the religious community to support an interfaith dialogue in the city, but we also saw signs of the tensions which still linger between majority groups and the minority Muslim population here. With the Catholic Archdiocese there was no sense of worry or concern, and we learned that the Church in Croatia is going through somewhat of a progressive transition due to some leadership changes and trying to work more closely with Orthodox and Muslim counterparts while being more inclusive rather than exclusive. This is a positive sign and a trend which provides optimism that over time maybe the dialogue in Croatia can become more universally inclusive rather than divisive. However, this hasn't happened yet. At the Mosque in Dubrovnik, we met with the Imam, and what was supposed to be a discussion on interfaith dialogue became essentially a defense of Islam for one-and-a-half hours. He emphasized to us how Islam is a religion of peace, how to be Muslim does not make one a terrorist, and how negative perceptions of Muslims in Croatia (and in most of Europe and the West) are propagated by media which focus on radical extremists and militant sects of the religion. This defense was triggered by a question about what the Islamic community is doing to work with other religious groups in the area and the answer he gave us seems to be unrelated. However, it is still a telling point of context for the situation in Croatia, and around the Balkans…where majority groups can control the discourse and isolate minority groups to the point of constant ideological defense and self-justification. This represents a troubling trend which we have already observed on our trip up to this point, a trend which is defined by lingering divisions between people which are used by politicians and the media they control to instill a sense of pride and nationalism in one population…usually the majority who gives the politicians their legitimacy and power, while dividing them against their political "opposition" who in the case of the Balkans also happen to be their neighbors.

Croatia, like other territories of the former Yugoslavia, is largely a secular country in practice, but the religion which influences its cultures and traditions and the dominant political discourse is that of the Roman Catholics. This trend is not unlike what we have seen in the other Balkan countries so far. People in the region are generally similar in terms of their mix of ethnic backgrounds and relatively few of them are actively practicing their religions. Nonetheless, most Croatians identify as Catholic, many Serbs identify as Eastern Orthodox, and the majority of the remainder of the populations in the former Yugoslav territories identify as Muslim. This is a divide which the people in power are using, along with nationalist identities, to reinforce their power and pit neighbor against neighbor in the region. Though religion is not the root of the problem or the cause of the tension in the Balkans, it is a significant component of the identities which the politicians are using as tools to rally their people against each other and maintain their positions of power. It has gotten to such a point that to be "Croat" is almost synonymous with being Catholic, to be "Serb" likewise comes with the assumption of being Eastern Orthodox, and to be "Bosniak", as we will soon se first hand, implies that one is Muslim. What does this mean for the people who live in the regions of Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina who do not claim these religions as their own? It means that it is very difficult for them to identify with the national identity of their home country, and that oftentimes they identify with the national identity of a neighboring country instead. It also means that the politicians in power since the fall of Yugoslavia have effectively made the discourse in the Balkans one which is defined by

the divisions between these various identities, rather than one which enhances shared identity, cooperation and kinship. As we have seen up to this point on the trip, people have a desire to belong to a community, but to belong to a community there we sometimes argue that there must be an "other". This "other" does not have to be an enemy and may not need to exist at all, but politicians are human beings and they are selfish. They desire to maintain their positions and their political parties' control. If they cannot extend their influence, they at least do everything possible to preserve it. Thus, they incite fear through political rhetoric and heavy-handed control of the media to create a fear of the "other", they divide communities against each other and continue to play a dangerous game where people teeter on the brink of open conflict with one another as a means of preserving the communities which help them define their identity.

Day 7, 8 and 9; Mostar, Srebrenica, and Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina; March 23rd-25th

After completing our brief tour of Croatia, we continued to Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the small crossroads community of Mostar. We only had a short amount of time in Mostar but were able to participate in a guided walking tour, during which we learned about some key features of the community and of the town. On one side of Mostar the population is Croat, and on the other it is Bosniak. Between these communities is a bridge which serves as both a symbolic and literal connection between the two identities and the two worlds. While the people in this community live peacefully next to each other and attend the same schools, Mostar's bridge is also a symbol of how fragile that connection and peace can be. It was destroyed during the Yugoslav wars as the communities on either side of the river came to identify with different powers who were vying for control and severed their connections with each other. Though it has been rebuilt from the ground up as an exact replica of its former self, as one stands on the bridge and considers the context of its literal and metaphorical purpose, one can't help but feel a bit uneasy. The communities are still separated, and their children generally attend different schools where they receive educations which tell history from a perspective that favors their own cultural and national identity. This is just another example of how the politicians who control the educational systems can manipulate the discourse in the society. We will see a visceral, historical example of the results of these divisions at our next stop, Srebrenica.

Following the brief, but symbolically important stop in Mostar, we continue through Bosnia-Herzegovina to a rarely mentioned memorial to one of the worst atrocities committed in the name of fear and human identity in the history of the human species, Srebrenica. The town of Srebrenica is a small and unimposing place. But it once used to be home to a vibrant and industrial community of over 36,000 people. At the climaxes of the Yugoslav wars, forces loyal to the Serbian leader, Slobodan Milošević, were making their push to control the regions of former Yugoslavia which had declared independence and pushing to expand Serbian-controlled territory. In 1995, the focus of their efforts was in Bosnia-Herzegovina and eliminating the Bosniak Muslim people and forces in the area who were loyal to the Bosnian leadership. The UN had made a number of declarations demanding that hostilities cease, and had even send some peacekeeping forces to help provide "safe areas" for local communities, but Milošević's forces

gradually encroached upon these safe areas until they pushed their borders, in one instance, to the center of the town of Srebrenica, where a small peacekeeping force of Dutch troops was maintaining a UN base in the area. Bosniak Serbs who were loyal to Milošević and fighting in his military campaign encircled this position with their armies, controlling heavy weaponry, tanks, and artillery, and began to round up the local Muslim populations. The UN forces, with limited ability to intervene or assist, allowed several thousand people to enter their compound for protection. However, tens of thousands of people remained outside the gates and either attempted to flee to other territories controlled by Bosnian Army forces or were loaded on buses and over several days they were executed by radical Serbian loyalists. Over 8,000 civilians died in what is definitively the worst case of genocide in Europe since World War Two…all in the name of a Serbian nation. This nation's Army and the human beings who served it were motivated by a cause which had been dictated by their self-interested political leadership, namely Slobodan Milošević, who wanted to unite what was once Yugoslavia under Serbian authority. To accomplish this goal, using the tools we have mentioned in this journal and previous reflections, he had convinced them that their ethnicity, religion, culture, and nation…. their human identity, was in danger if they did not carry out these atrocities. In the name of this fear, and in the name of preserving this identity which had been reinforced under the false pretenses of their government, they murdered over 8,000 people who had only months ago been their neighbors. Today, Srebrenica's population is scarcely over 6,000 people, and the scars from the atrocities carried out there linger in the memories of its people as a reminder of what a self-interested political system run by a self-interested human being can do to manipulate a system for evil if unchecked or unquestioned.

Finally, we travelled to Sarajevo. Sarajevo was under siege by the same armies loyal to Slobodan Milošević for over three years from 1992-1995, and over 11,000 of its people died during this time. Now, it is a living relic of the wars of the 1990's and a complex political system still exists in Bosnia-Herzegovina today because of those wars. Today, Bosnia-Herzegovina is still divided, as its name implies, into two "states" within the state. One is The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the other is Republika Srpska. As the names of these regions suggest, they are a direct result of the lines that existed when peace was finally achieved at the end of the Yugoslav wars in the late 1990's. Sarajevo itself is divided into two halves, each of which falls into one of these respective regions which is managed by a government who, for all intents and purposes, still promote the rhetoric and divisions that caused the war in the 1990's in the first place. For example, though they live in different parts of the same country, children who live in these different regions still learn about history from one perspective or the other, and they learn to identify themselves according to the same definitions and world views which politicians have been using since the fall of Yugoslavia to gain political support. Even with an incident as horrible as what happened at Srebrenica in their recent memory, the same discourse that caused it is being used to propel political agendas in future generations of voters. Fear and identity politics are still the way of the world in the Balkans because they are easy to manipulate and based on an inherently human need to identify with something. Unfortunately, because politicians are self-interested human beings, that discourse which promotes fear based on identity and the "other" will not change until they see that it is no longer in their best interest. Therefore, it will not change until the people, the source of the government's legitimacy, are able

to change the discourse. To do that, the international community and opposition groups within the country need to undermine the fear being created and promote, over time, an identity based on unity instead of division.

How can we do that? Our last meeting in Sarajevo presents us with one example that works towards this goal and can provide some level of optimism that a different type of political discourse might be possible. On our final stop of our journey with our final meeting, we met with the leader of an organization called the Center for Nonviolent Action, or "CNA". It is a group made up of war veterans who fought against each other in the Yugoslav wars. With bases of operation in both Sarajevo and Belgrade, it reaches out to these former enemies, brings them together for dialogue, and promotes a shared sense of human identity which can promote peace. By doing so, over the course of the decades since the end of the war, it has taken people who were once bitter enemies, shooting at each other and murdering each other in the name of their identities which were promoted by their national leadership, and turned them into friends. Now, the organization has over 50 permanent members who travel throughout the region of former Yugoslavia working to change the discourse. By identifying shared characteristics and elements of humanity which these people can identify with, the organization is actively changing the discourse away from one where what matters is who is a "Serb" or "Croat" or "Bosniak" and moving towards one in which all that matters is what makes all these people human. The organization is still small, and it is still a long way off from changing the discourse of entire nations, but it is a start, and perhaps a perfect example of what needs to happen at the ground level of a political system if one wants to shift a discourse.

Reflection Conclusions

Throughout the journal entries I made on this trip, I posed a few questions. I would like to return to a few of them here to conclude my journal and shift towards another related example of similar kinds of politics which is occurring elsewhere in the world. Here are the questions I asked, and based on my reflections, a possible prototype for one form of long term solution:

1) If the politicians in power won't change the discourse unless it suits them, and the odds are stacked against the opposition in forcing the politicians' hand, how do we get to true and substantive change that leads to politics which promote peace instead of tension?

2) How do we affect the human dimension in such a way that the politicians' self-interests change to be more in line with the best interests of the people?

3) How can we prevent situations like this from occurring in the future, in areas of the world at which similar conditions may already be present?

I will attempt to answer all three of these questions with one, unified stream of logic. I stated throughout my journal that politics of conflict are based on human identity and the interactions that result at the juncture between shared identity and diverging identities. They are based on the characteristics that enable us to become part of a community and identify as a member of a group. Therefore, our human societies and their boundaries tend not so much to be defined by states or their systems, but by the human identities that unite and divide us. The

problem is that politicians, who are also human and self-interested, create systems of government and information distribution which utilize the places where these identities diverge to create friction between those societies and to gain support based on fear of "others". Once this process begins and questions of identity become the dominant discourse, as it has in the Balkans, it creates an environment where conflict is nearly inevitable. If we want to change the discourse that politicians promote, we must understand that they won't do so until they have reason to believe that it is in their personal best interest. They need the people's support to lead. So, to change the way the politicians act, we need to change the way people think and identify themselves. We need to reverse the thinking that causes us to focus on divergent identities and individual characteristics and promote to the fullest extent a shared human identity. This is easier said than done, but if CNA and organizations like it who we have met throughout this trip can unite their efforts with those of the international community towards long term goals of eliminating divisions between people, they will reduce the conditions which allow politicians to use fear of the "other" as a tool for political gain. Through their efforts over time, there won't be as many of the "other" who politicians can use to manipulate fear, and potentially more people will be able to unite behind an identity of a shared humanity and human experience. Eventually, this group of people will grow. As the group grows, the discourse will spread until it shapes an irrefutable majority made up of people who came from many ethnicities, religions, etc. to identify themselves using fewer and fewer words as they discover what they have in common. Perhaps, someday, we may just use one word: "human". Then, politicians will be forced to change the way they define and maintain their power, or they will risk losing it. In their own self-interest, they will have to share the discourse of shared human identity and greater freedom from fear or risk losing their legitimacy and their power. Through this process, the conditions which promote systems of government that sustain division can be minimized, and one of the major tools of power politics, fear of the "other", can be drastically reduced. The more that fear and divergent identity can be taken out of the dominant discourse of politics, the more conditions for preventing conflict will also be improved.

From the Balkans to the Korean Peninsula

All these journal entries are well and good, but they don't mean much if the reflections contained within cannot be translated to other regions facing similar types of conflict and division. I would propose that they can, and in the following short continuation of my reflection, I will extend my stream of logic to attempt to explain how the changing of the discourse in human society and changing of the nature of how we identify ourselves are both necessary to reduce fear and move towards systems which enable sustainable development and sustainable peace around the world. Using the example of the lingering conflict on the Korean peninsula, I will also argue how the dominant cultural discourse in a society enables politicians to shape their governmental systems, rather than the other way around…and I will examine how the international community's interaction with the society in question influences the discourse. This reflection is also a separate argumentative essay which I have written partially as a result of and inspired by my studies and reflections concerning the Balkans:

        Since the signing of the ceasefire that ended open conflict on the Korean peninsula in 1953, South Korea and North Korea have experienced divergent forms of development, and the two countries and their relations with each other have become an example of the interconnectedness of development, security, and peace. While South Korea has experienced staggering multifaceted development, North Korea has continued to fall farther and farther behind. South Korea has embraced many forms of multilateral cooperation and more open economic policies. On the contrary, North Korea has grown more and more isolated and continues to cut itself off from the rest of the world. As the developmental divide on the Korean peninsula has widened, security has become more of a concern and certain leaders have begun to use the divides that exist for their own gain. North Korea's leaders have developed a form of cultural hegemony which allows them to largely manipulate the beliefs, values, and perceptions of the North Korean people through state media and other means. They have convinced their people that nuclear development and military spending are the only things keeping them safe from the rest of the world, and that South Korea and its allies are constantly looking for ways to destroy the North Korean people. Thus, as South Korea has continued to develop, North Korea's fears have grown. Its leaders use those fears and insecurities to justify extraordinary hardship, poor living conditions, and stagnant development. Every missile test is a "victory of the people", and every successful nuclear experiment is a blow against the potential "foreign invader". As tensions rise, sanctions fail, and the divide between north and south grows, what can we do to stabilize the region? The security of the region is vital to this prospect, but not in the traditional military sense. Until the North Korean people feel secure that the rest of the world is not a threat to their existence, the current regime's cultural hegemony will be generally incontrovertible. To resolve the tension on the Korean peninsula and bring some form of peaceful multifaceted development to North Korea, the international community must first demonstrate to the North Korean people that their security is in everyone's best interest, and that we truly bear them no ill will. Only then can we begin to undermine the legitimacy of the current regime's hegemony, move towards some kind of permanent peace treaty, and ensure the development of the northern half of the Korean peninsula.

        Over the past several decades, South Korea has been an example of a country which views itself as generally secure can achieve. It has embraced more open economic policies, bilateral and multilateral agreements of various types, and participated in organizations like the United Nations. Its economic development has been associated with words like "miraculous" and "unprecedented". Though its people generally have a sense of potential conflict with other countries, it is not immediately obvious in their daily lives. The people of Seoul are within range of North Korean artillery, and yet they live their lives like those in many other developed countries, focused primarily on achieving individual success and happiness rather than worried about the threat to the north. In a recent article by Reuters, one citizen gave the following answer to a question about concerns related to North Korea:

> "We have more than enough to concern ourselves with in our
> everyday lives. Personally, I worry more about how much it's
> going to cost me to put food on the table (than North Korea). Talk
> of North Korea honestly feels distant to me." (Kim, 2017)

People go about their daily lives focused on issues of making money, feeding their families, educating their children, and other seemingly mundane concerns rather than worrying about the prospect of war. That prospect is certainly there, but it is not all-consuming. This South Korean lifestyle or culture is a testament to the overall sense of security that the population has. Though far from perfect, it has allowed the development of South Korea to progress in its current manner, without the need for a substantive fear of a threat to normal daily existence. It also stands in clear contrast to the diametrically opposed lifestyle of people living north of the 38th parallel.

As opposed to peace and stability, North Korea's leaders have built their power and their regime on the foundation of fear. Over time, North Korea has fostered its own isolation and built a cultural hegemony based on perpetual fear of the "outsider", channeling enormous percentages of its capital into weapons development instead of basic developmental needs for its people like reliable food sources, clean water, and hygiene. To that end, constant sanctions from the UN, joint military exercises between South Korea and its allies, and almost universally negative coverage in foreign media outlets serve as ammunition for the propaganda of the North Korean regime, which it uses to reinforce the culture of fear it has built. In a recent NPR interview with North Korean defectors and South Korean university professors, one interviewee had the following statement:

> "Outside pressure on North Korea — sanctions or threats of attack — actually help the regime win domestic support. North Korea is as always on the defensive, and fear rallies people around their Dear Leader." (Frayer, 2017)

The perpetual sense of fear that has been bred by the North Korean government (and is largely justifiable based on foreign actors' actions) has been used to maintain the regime's hegemony over the people. This has also led to development along one unified path towards weapons development and military might at the expense of all other forms of progress. The North Korean state has spent so much of its resource capital on military development, it has starved off the other areas in which countries like South Korea have been able to advance. However, if we ever want this reality to change we must first de-legitimize the cultural hegemony of fear which North Korean leaders have built over the past half-century.

In general terms, creating an environment in which a country's citizens and leaders feel "free from fear or anxiety" is key to enabling multifaceted development to occur and to maintaining lasting peace. The Korean Peninsula is a living example of this truth. South Korea has found ways to create a culture in which its citizens feel safe and has converted relatively limited resources into rapid growth and development. North Korea's leaders have used their power to channel the country's resources almost solely into feeding a nationalistic anxiety which fuels the desire for constant weapons development. If North Korea's development is ever going to proceed in a fashion more like it's Northeast Asian neighbors, the current leadership's cultural hegemony based on fostering the people's insecurities must be replaced. Influencing the hegemonic discourse of a system is not an easy process, especially when dealing with one as deeply ingrained as the discourse in North Korea. However, through a combination of open economic policies, bilateral and multilateral dialogue with other states, and potentially even publicly sanctioned policies of non-aggression, we can begin to (slowly and substantively)

undermine the existing cultural hegemony in North Korea, improve the security situation on the Korean Peninsula, and begin to change the popular opinion of North Korea's "way forward" according to its own people. This increased sense of security and changed culture will, in turn, allow focus on other more pressing forms of development that will ensure the well-being of the North Korean people, and peace on the Korean peninsula.

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