Faculty of Political Science

An Analysis of Successful Cooperation Strategies Towards Ethnic Reconciliation Between International and Domestic Civil Society in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina

CEERES Master's Thesis

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130/FPN

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August 2024

Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Field of Studies: Political Science

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of:

Master of Arts in International Relations and Diplomacy (Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies): University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

International Master's (IntM) in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies: University of Glasgow, UK

Master of Arts in Social Sciences (MA) in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies: University of Tartu, Estonia

Word count of the thesis: 24,334 words

Authorship Declaration: I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

Danae Driessen, 22 August 2024

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For Aurora, born May 25, 2024, Sarajevo.

Poetically giving a new meaning of light and hope to this day.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors and mentors, Prof. Dr. Valida Repovac-Nikšić, Dr. Sara Bernard, and Dr. Melina Sadiković, for their guidance, kindness and continuous support, on an academic and personal level. Additionally, I am greatly indebted to all the interviewees, who donated their time and wisdom, and without whom this research would not have been possible.

Furthermore, I would like to thank the students of my cohort, particularly Beatrice, who kept reminding me that we were all suffering through this research, but we were all going to get there someday, as well as my parents who several times proofread this. Special thanks go to Arnaud for patiently nodding and encouraging me every time I did not think I was going to finish this master's thesis.

Finally, I could not have finished this journey without you, my dear Aurora. Thank you for being my motivation throughout this entire process.

This research explores the notion of reconciliation and its application in Bosnia and Herzegovina by civil society actors. Not only does it attempt to define what reconciliation means to actors on the ground and how it should be approached, but this author also delves into the challenges of various civil society actors operating in a limited area for the same goal. The aim of this project is to shed light on several misunderstandings and assumptions about civil society and reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but more importantly to listen to what experts on-site think and offer recommendations for improvement as well as filling gaps in the literature about the more practical side of reconciliation.

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An Analysis of Successful Cooperation Strategies Towards Ethnic Reconciliation Between International and Domestic Civil Society in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina

Introduction

"There was no genocide in Srebrenica", words stated confidently by Milorad Dodik, not in 1995, but in May 2024. The President of Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina is objecting to the resolution that was just voted by the General Assembly of the United Nations establishing an international memorial day for the genocide in Srebrenica, on 11th July 1995 (Al Jazeera 2024). Although the resolution was adopted, there is still no consensus on the memorialisation of the events in Srebrenica as many diplomatic representatives argued they preferred to abstain, due to the tensions it continues to cause in Bosnia-Herzegovina (United Nations 2024).

Furthermore, the 2022 parliamentary elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) have confirmed the growing ethnonationalist tendencies in the country. Currently, the ethnonationalist parties, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), and the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), are the largest parties in parliament, along with the Social Democratic Party (SDP) whose support from Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs has dwindled (Ćužić 2023). It seems that ethnonationalist divisions are being increasingly used by political parties since the failure of the 2006 constitutional reforms (Zdeb 2019, 606–7).

These observations at the domestic and international level are frightening realisations that ethnonationalism is still present in today's BiH, and that a possible escalation cannot be excluded. Despite time and resources invested in the country by international and domestic actors, reconciliation between ethnic communities does not seem to improve. For example, the World Bank, several agencies of the United Nations, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Office for High Representative have a combined investment of more than 1 billion dollars in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is still only a fraction of the

budget allocated to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, showcasing the efforts, at least the financial ones (Hayden 2011, 323). However, domestic political leaders have shown little to no interest in appeasing ethnonationalist tendencies; domestic top-down reconciliation efforts have been nearly non-existent.

Therefore, this paper attempts to answer two sets of questions. First, this research asks how reconciliation can be achieved in post-war BiH through bottom-up, civil society approaches since top-down approaches seem to have failed; what have been the challenges faced by civil society reconciliation; and how can strategies for reconciliation be improved? Secondly, the research poses the question why international and domestic civil society actors have achieved limited results through their cooperation towards reconciliation, and how their cooperation could be improved.

To study post-war reconciliation through civil society and cooperation, Bosnia-Herzegovina was identified as an interesting case study because of its socialist past, coupled with the current democratisation process and international investments, which intensify the creation and growth of the civil society sector. Furthermore, BiH has been considered as a miniature version of Yugoslavia because of its multiethnic society. It was also the main scene of the Yugoslav wars (1990-2001), again providing the most extreme example of the need for post-war reconciliation. Through the study of BiH, this research simultaneously gains insights about the remaining Western Balkan countries, but also about other post-socialist countries with a multi-ethnic society who face similar challenges such as corruption, ethnonationalism, and irredentism.

As a preamble to this research, the extensive debate on the definition of the term reconciliation shall briefly be evoked, but more specifically, an attempt will be made to explain the efficiency of various reconciliation strategies through the framework of conflict transformation as proposed by Lederach. Other theories such as liberal peace and ethnic reconciliation shall also be cited because of their relevance in the context of BiH. Nevertheless, this research is mainly motivated by the observation that there is insufficient knowledge on how civil society actors should cooperate, notably because they are too often assumed to be a homogenous and united front.

Therefore, the methodology in this paper is to primarily focus on primary data, collected through semi-structured interviews with a variety of civil society actors, foreign and BiH nationals, to understand their perceptions and hopes of their role pertaining to reconciliation and cooperation in post-war BiH. This method allows a better understanding of the current

situation and motivations, and hopefully fill the gaps surrounding conflict transformation application. As such, this will be an empirical puzzle to confirm, or infirm, existing theoretical assumptions about reconciliation, and offer some new insights to the theory as well.

A preliminary explanatory theory is that perhaps civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot adeptly foster reconciliation because it has internalised ethnic division. As a result, the diversities in BiH, rather than similarities, are exacerbated, hindering the creation a space of dialogue where resemblances between one another can be addressed to create stronger community ties. Civil society actors have become passive, forgetting their own agency, because they have turned too reliant on international assistance, and do not consider themselves capable to go against politicians and the ethnonationalist system. Also, for too long reconciliation has been a vague term with psychologically based strategies, causing a need for a more pragmatic approach with immediate tangible results which will appeal to more people than only to experts.

The aim of this research is to contribute to a better understanding of reconciliation and the agency of civil society in BiH, as well as the rest of the Western Balkans, and the challenges civil society faces to foster this reconciliation. Through this research, I hope to shed light on certain misunderstandings between scholars and activists, internationals and Bosnian and Herzegovinians, on the concepts of reconciliation and cooperation. This can be an opportunity to discover alternative methods to achieve reconciliation. Furthermore, this research may contribute to raise awareness on the importance of local civil society, to encourage international and national political elites to support civil society initiatives rather than ignore or undermine them. Also, this can enlighten civil society on the nature of the message they promote and how it can become more accessible to a larger audience. Finally, this research may contribute to the larger body of literature on post-socialist, as well as post-conflict, multiethnic states where similar issues have arisen regarding civil society evolution, cooperation, and reconciliation.

I. Theoretical Framework: Conflict Transformation and Forms of Cooperation

The following chapter attempts to review and address the literature on the concepts of reconciliation and civil society, specifically adapted to the post-war context of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Therefore, the first focus of this section is to define reconciliation in all the dimensions that will be relevant to this research, as well as determining whether ethnic or religious labels should be included to its definition. Secondly, this chapter addresses the agents that will be studied further along and attempts to define the roles civil society actors can fulfil in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the challenges they face in fulfilling these roles.

A. Definitions and Approaches to Reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Reconciliation is not an exclusively political concept, nor is it used solely in relation to ethnicity or ethnic conflict but can be studied through various lenses and fields of study. In this research, reconciliation must be understood in the context of reconstruction of a post-conflictual society, namely BiH after the 1992-1995 war.

This section delves into the existing approaches to reconciliation, by analysing the two main theoretical trends, conflict transformation theories and liberal peace theories, as well as more concrete approaches to reconciliation. Additionally, this section examines recurring challenges to reconciliation in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, particularly in relation to ethnicity and ethnic reconciliation.

1. The Concept of Reconciliation

Some definitions of reconciliation can be used in a more international or domestic context. Therefore, observing reconciliation through a general, political, social, and ethnic lens provides an array of definitions between which the most relevant choice for Bosnia and Herzegovina can be made.

For a general definition of reconciliation, Pankhurst (1999, 240) offers a list with various definitions, where the term can mean "to become friendly with (someone) after estrangement or to re-establish friendly relations between (two or more people); to settle (a quarrel); to make (oneself or another) no longer opposed to something; to cause to acquiesce in something unpleasant; to make (two apparently conflicting things) compatible or consistent with each other". As such, the author points out how certain definitions emphasise the absence of violence, and other definitions focus more on the importance of compromise despite the unpleasantness of it. The idea of compromise, finding an "equilibrium", or compromise, is one shared by Dwyer (1999, 89). Aiken (2010, 168–69) echoes another definition given by Pankhurst, by defining reconciliation as a long-term process of transforming relations between hostile groups into peaceful relations.

Thus, as a starting point, reconciliation can be defined as looking for a compromise to transform hostile relations into positive ones, but this is insufficient to describe what reconciliation means on a societal level.

Reconciliation also has a moral, even religious, connotation, because of its intrinsic link with the concept of forgiveness (Dwyer 1999, 82–83). Not only because religion is used as a justification in many conflicts, but it can also foster forgiveness and reconciliation, particularly in identity conflicts but only as long as both parties share the same religion (Auerbach 2005, 471–72). However, Franović (2008, 19) argues that, although reconciliation has a religious origin, the term can be defined in a secular way, but scholars still disagree on this definition.

Because of this apparent disagreement in the academic community, this research strives to find a secular definition of the concept of reconciliation, but one which can also be applied to conflicts with a religious dimension, as is the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although religion plays an important political role in BiH because it is linked to the ethnic division of the country, many citizens are not personally deeply religious (Oddie 2012; Abazović 2015, 17). However, a secular definition does not mean that religion cannot be used in reconciliation strategies.

To address reconciliation at a larger societal scale, it is necessary to define and delimit the term "reconciliation" in international and domestic politics. This is what can be referred to as "political reconciliation". Several authors like Ugarizza and Nussio (2017, 4), and Bloomfield, Barnes, and Huyse (2003, 12) define political reconciliation as the process of antagonistic groups seeking compromise to coexist and build a future. This political meaning refers to

macro-level reconciliation, not only at an individual level, but also between a country and its past (Dwyer 1999, 84; 91). Franović (2008, 20) agrees and defines reconciliation with both references to past and future, as the healing of relations to make sure the past does not repeat itself, and committing towards a common future.

Reconciliation is also the idea that antagonistic groups are willing to obey to the same democratic principles, political institutions, and rule of law within a society, and take responsibility for the past (Strupinskienė 2017, 453; 457–58; Merwe, Baxter, and Chapman 2009, 143). However, political reconciliation is impossible if individuals do not possess the psychological motivation to reconcile at an interpersonal level (Dwyer 1999, 84). Particularly in cases where one side has committed certain acts of violence and human rights abuses, the past is an important factor to consider in the process of reconciliation. Thus, both the societal and interpersonal relations cannot, and will not, be ignored in the research.

Nevertheless, reconciliation not only has a political dimension, but also social, economic, psychological, cultural and legal ones (Strupinskienė 2017, 453; Ugarriza and Nussio 2017, 4–5; Auerbach 2005, 474–75). Socially, reconciliation is about the peaceful coexistence between conflicting groups and compromising on a narrative of the past (Strupinskienė 2017, 453–56). This definition is close to the definitions of political reconciliation given above, which already incorporated the idea of coexistence and compromise, but political reconciliation also includes more specific references to abiding to the same law and institutions. Economically, reconciliation refers to the redistribution of wealth so victims of the past can be compensated and further economic growth of the country can be assured, as well as the willingness of antagonistic groups to enter into business relations (Strupinskienė 2017, 454; 457). In cases when offenders have had the opportunity to collect wealth by exploiting their victims, the need for redistribution of wealth is frequently forgotten by international actors as it is considered an issue that will resolve itself through other methods, such as the liberalisation of the market (Strupinskienė 2017, 457; Lai 2016, 362–63).

The psychological aspect of reconciliation refers to the transformation of relationships through a healing process to create “mutual acceptance” between the parties (Ugarriza and Nussio 2017, 4; Auerbach 2005, 474). Similarly, the cultural dimension also portrays reconciliation as a transformation, but refers to identities and ideology, rather than relations, which serve to replace the preceding violence between antagonistic parties of a conflict (Ugarriza and Nussio 2017, 4). However, the legal definition of reconciliation accentuates the

successful realisation of transitional justice mechanisms to uncover the truth and establish accountability (Ugarriza and Nussio 2017, 5).

The legal and cultural definitions focus more on the societal dimension of reconciliation, rather than the interpersonal as the psychological definitions do. Both dimensions are relevant, however, which is perhaps best represented by the definition of reconciliation offered by Lederach (1997, 30–31) as a place where paradoxical objectives of truth, justice, peace, and mercy meet. These are objectives to be achieved both at an interpersonal and a societal level, ultimately serving as a guideline for reconciliation strategies. Nonetheless, as a definition for reconciliation, Lederach's one remains too abstract to delimit what this research explores which are the practical aims and challenges of reconciliation in BiH.

Another terminological ambiguity of the concept is whether reconciliation is a process or an outcome. Is Bosnia and Herzegovina undergoing a process of reconciliation, or is it attempting to achieve reconciliation?

Fischer (2011b, 415) argues that the majority of authors consider reconciliation to be a process because it refers to the constant building and improving of relationships between individuals. In contrast, Auerbach (2005, 474) recognises that reconciliation scholars view the concept as both a process and an outcome, but mostly focus on the outcome - stable peaceful relations between former enemies.

Bar-Tal and Bennink (2004, 14–22), Chapman (2009, 143), and Nets-Zehngut (2007, 58) consider reconciliation as a psychological process of transforming conflictual relations with the aim of acquiring a new type of relationship between the whole population and the state, and a shared commitment to peace. In this research, therefore, reconciliation will be considered both a process and an outcome, as suggested by Bloomsfield, Barnes and Huyse (2003, 12).

When applying the concept of reconciliation to BiH, an additional precision should be made because of the nature of the conflict affecting three ethnic communities, adding a symbolic dimension which is too often overlooked (Kaufman 2006, 201–2). However, for Baker (2015, 94–95), ethnic reconciliation does not seem to differ from political reconciliation in its definition, only in the process through which it is implemented. Furthermore, Baker (2015, 95–96) criticises overemphasizing the role of ethnicity in the reconciliation process, because the underlying economic and social issues then tend to be overlooked.

Keranen (2014, 131–32) agrees both with Baker and Kaufman, and also criticises the overestimation of ethnicity in reconciliation although stresses that ethnicity, and the symbolism

through which it is conveyed, can become an increasingly difficult challenge for reconciliation. Therefore, it is important to mention that Bosnia-Herzegovina is undergoing a process of ethnic reconciliation, but the definition of reconciliation does not need to be adapted to the ethnic context. This will be discussed later in the reconciliation strategies.

In summary, the literature review has shown that reconciliation is a comprehensive concept, composed of various dimensions, with different elements depending on the field of study – law, politics, psychology, or sociology. Nevertheless, there are several concrete and recurring elements, summed up in the definition offered by Bennink and Bar-Tal (2004, 15), which is why this research will be based upon this definition. Thus, reconciliation is the transformation of hostile relations through psychological healing, based on compromise, justice, and equality between antagonistic groups to take accountability for past crimes, exist peacefully under shared institutions, and normalise political and economic relations, eventually building a better future together (Bar-Tal and Bennink 2004, 15).

2. Strategies of Reconciliation

Since World War II, various conflicts have necessitated reconciliation of divided communities, and scholars have attempted to identify trends in the actions undertaken towards such goal.

Ultimately, the present research will be based on conflict transformation theories because of the central role social relations and civil society can play within these theories. The focus lies in the deeper social transformations various actors have contributed towards. Nevertheless, there are various theories and strategies to reconciliation, such as liberal peace theories, which will briefly be discussed because of their relevance to BiH.

a. Conflict Transformation Theories

At the turn of the 21st century, a shift occurred in the theories surrounding peacebuilding and reconciliation when conflict resolution was replaced by conflict transformation (Botes 2003, 3). Paffenholz (2014, 13) offers a simple and general definition of conflict transformation as the process of transforming violent behaviour into a peaceful one. Botes (2003, 3) elaborates, stating that it can refer to the transformation either of the relationship between antagonistic groups through mutual understanding, political change based on justice and equity, or the

psychological transformation of individuals' mentality through mediation. This reflects both the societal and interpersonal dimensions of reconciliation.

However, although the concept of conflict transformation has experienced an extensive debate in the theoretical field, it has not yet integrated the practice of peacebuilding and reconciliation because methods in the field have not yet drastically changed (Botes 2003, 20). The theory developed by Lederach (1997) likely had the most impact in the field of reconciliation and conflict transformation. The author defines conflict transformation as:

> "a comprehensive set of lenses for describing how conflict emerges from, evolves within, and brings about changes in the personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions, and for developing creative responses that promote peaceful change within those dimensions through nonviolent mechanisms." (Lederach 1997, 83)

Lederach (1997, 83–84) offers an "integrated framework" to address conflict and foster reconciliation at all levels of human interaction in a divided society, based on the postulate that conflicts are forever moving and evolving phenomena since they are actually a process following four stages: latent conflict to confrontation to negotiation to peaceful to peace (Lederach 1997, 70; 75). Thus, peacebuilding is a long-term, multi-faceted process, not a one-dimensional project that relies on a single actor to carry it out (Lederach 1997, 63; 67).

Lederach (1997, 75–78) considered both conflict and reconciliation to be processes wherein relations evolve, these processes require a sustainable long-term transformation with a broad timeframe. Although a crisis may require immediate action, such as a cease-fire, these actions and solutions should already be taken with a long-term (about twenty years) vision in mind because even temporary actions will influence long-term results. For instance, the short-term solution of instituting the Office of High Representative to foster compromise was a band-aid to ethnic conflict, with little long-term planning, but this institution took away all accountability for BiH politicians to cooperate (Dijkstra and Raadschelders 2022).

The overall objective of conflict transformation theory proposed by Lederach (1997, 26–27; 30) stipulates that reconciliation should first accentuate the relationship between antagonistic groups, fostering their interaction, rather than minimising it. Then, a space for

dialogue needs to be created to not only address the past, but also to visualize a long-term project for an interdependent future between the antagonistic groups (1997, 35).

Nets-Zehngut (2007, 59–61) delves deeper into Lederach's theory to offer a more concise taxonomy of the reconciliation process by distinguishing between internal and external elements and components. The internal dimension focuses on the parties' emotions surrounding the conflict, and activities that target their psychological state. External elements and components focus on the material destruction and the need of infrastructural reconstruction. The external and internal dimensions can be impacted through naturally occurring activities which are not explicitly meant to advance reconciliation, such as day to day business relations, or through staged activities, actively promoting reconciliation, like workshops or reparations (2007, 63). The author does judge which type of activity is the more successful. This taxonomy will be used to identify and classify the types of activities implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and potentially determine the most effective types of activity for reconciliation in the region. Because the taxonomy focuses on top-down activities, it will be adapted, when possible, to bottom-up reconciliation activities.

Also building on Lederach's theory, Paffenholz (2014) offers an updated theory, arguing that the theory and its implementation have overly focused on local actors, without sufficiently considering the role of regional and international actors in creating a more disadvantageous, environment for civil society in which to operate (Paffenholz 2014, 19–21). As for concrete strategies, Paffenholz (2014, 24) mentions that projects promoting shared socialisation of antagonistic groups are typically met with resistance, specifically in Bosnia-Herzegovina, when framed as a reconciliation activity. However, when local communities are invited to partake in shared projects and activities under different labels, they are more likely to participate and positively engage with other ethnic communities.

Bock and Anderson (1999, 327–30) explore how conflict transformation can more practically be approached by third-party, or international, civil society, and they identify two types: pre-emptive and promotive approaches. Pre-emptive approaches target areas where a conflict could erupt, focusing less on post-conflict societies. Promotive approaches can be organised both during a conflict, to keep it from escalating, or afterwards, to prevent its resurgence. It engages people at a communal level to build a relation on shared interests. In BiH, an example of this approach was implemented in the ethnically segregated schools by

organising common parent-teacher meetings with parents from all children, regardless of ethnicity, to foster shared problem-solving.

Focusing back on promotive approaches, Bock and Anderson (1999, 330–32) base their systems dynamic on the business model to identify when and how the help of third parties is most efficient. The authors state that regular investment and assistance in capacity building is most effective, rather than waiting for a perceived increase in potential violence, because delaying assistance may cause further instability. Therefore, investments should be made regularly. Additionally, the authors suggest that third parties invest in durable capital, such as shared institutions and events, and human capital, such as community leadership trainings, to invoke a more inclusive sense of belonging and information literacy (Bock and Anderson 1999, 334–35).

The promotive approach theory offers a more concrete tactic of conflict transformation. However, the theory offers little explanation of what domestic actors from the conflicting communities can do, focusing mostly on international actors. Furthermore, the business model limits the third parties' potential in offering material assistance, ignoring mediation or advocacy.

Another concrete strategy to foster conflict transformation is that by Jäger (2014, 11), who explores conflict transformation through direct and structural peace education. Direct peace education creates staged spaces for people of different antagonistic groups to interact such as workshops, actively promoting values of peace, and explicitly confronting the antagonistic groups' contradictory beliefs or historical narratives. Typically, civil society and educators are first trained in these peace values, before structural reforms to the education system are proposed, such as revising curricula and textbooks. This method can be criticised for its limited outreach, particularly when the official education systems continues to endorse contradictory narratives (Jäger 2014, 12–16).

Peace education is important in Bosnia and Herzegovina where education is divided along ethnic lines. Multiple organisations tackle this issue by training educators, such as the Peace Education Hub and the Center for Civil Society Promotion, or directly working with children on the values of peace, such as Youth for Peace. However, in BiH there is doubt on the outreach and impact of this reconciliation strategy.

In conclusion, conflict transformation explains how reconciliation requires a long-term and comprehensive strategy supported by different levels of actors, outlining social cohesion

activities to work on common goals and foster reconciliation. However, many of these activities seem to exist in a vacuum, ignoring the political and international actors and contexts particularly important in BiH, as these may limit or enhance the effects of these activities. Other theories on strategies to achieve reconciliation are outlined in the next section where more reconciliation activities are identified and the complex political context of BiH is addressed.

b. Other Theories of Strategies to Reconciliation

Besides conflict transformation theories, reconciliation can also be studied through, e.g. liberal peace theories, considered as the main theory for international peace practitioners (Campbell, Chandler, and Sabaratnam 2011, 13; Avi-Guy 2021, 289). Liberal peace theories require three steps, peace-making or ceasing hostilities, peacekeeping or the deployment of UN forces to prevent violence, and finally peacebuilding, the action of securing peace and avoiding resurgence of the conflict through a comprehensive democratisation plan (Boutros-Ghali and Secretary-General 1992, 21). However, liberal peace theories have also been heavily criticised, because they are seen as an attempt by Western countries to transpose their own regimes, marked by economic liberalisation and democratisation, and lacking alternative views on peacebuilding, especially for societies that are not yet ready for a liberal regime (Campbell, Chandler, and Sabaratnam 2011, 32; 175; 187; Sharp 2013, 180; Avi-Guy 2021, 293–96).

For instance, the power-sharing mechanism in BiH included three constituent people, which are formed by the three main ethnic groups – Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs – to promote negotiations at the top-level and foster political stability. However, this division in three ethnic groups complicated conflict transformation, because the political elite of each constituent people uses the fear of domination by the other to further instil mistrust towards other ethnic groups (Avi-Guy 2021; Kostovicova and Bojicic-Dzelilovic 2015, 188). Therefore, liberal peace theories are interesting to understand how the international intervention operated in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but insufficient to address reconciliation.

Due to the growing number of protracted ethnic conflicts in the late 20th century, and the difficulty of rebuilding lasting peace, several authors attempt to identify the necessary conditions to establish peace and reconciliation in this particular type of conflicts. For instance, even before the war in BiH, Azar and Haddad (1986, 1350) state that for a conflict to be truly resolved, three conditions need to be met: security, accepting (not merely tolerating) pluralism of society, and shared institutions to implement conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms.

The authors do not delve further in how to persuade citizens to accept this plurality or give indications of efficient institutional conflict resolution mechanisms.

Baird (1999) also addresses the changing nature of ethnic conflicts, stressing that the fear instilled in the people leads them to support ethnonationalist ideals. The author supports the presence of a third-party institutionalised mediator to create the conditions of reconciliation by addressing the conflicting values in ethnic conflict and make them more compatible. Similarly, Bock and Anderson (1999, 336) point out that international CSOs can make an effective impact in reconciliation because they are perceived as neutral.

In terms of the method for reconciliation, Baird (1999) favours a peace-centred approach where justice is not a central theme, unlike Long and Brecke had argued, but just a tool for peace. Since ethnic identities are permanently changing social constructions, they can be used as the base for a narrative of reconciliation rather than ethnonationalism, encouraging mediators to search for similar cultural elements present in the different populations' ethnic identities which are likely to foster reconciliation. However, continuously pointing out the similarities, and unavoidably the differences, between ethnic communities can also lead to freezing ethnic division.

Kaufman (2006) points out that the ethnic label to a conflict stems from the manipulation of ethnic symbolism, adding a heavy symbolic dimension to the conflict, which can then be particularly difficult to resolve, since the ethnic conflict becomes entrenched with a population's self-identity and beliefs, rather than material interests. Thus, conflict resolution in an ethnic conflict requires a reconciliation process to "address the emotional and symbolic roots of ethnic violence" (Kaufman 2006, 202). Kaufman (2006) provides a comprehensive four-step-plan approach, specifically tailored to ethnic reconciliation: political de-escalation, focussing on problem-solving workshops, and discrediting the message of opponents to the peace agreement to convince the general public that peace is more beneficial than conflict. Nevertheless, the author admits there is not a single unified method of reconciliation with proven successful results (Kaufman 2006, 207–14).

Since effective ethnic reconciliation methods remain uncertain, this research will focus on the reconciliation methods that were attempted and that have generated relevant results for actors in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The taxonomy offered by Lederach (1997) and Nets-Zehngut (2007) will be the leading thread to recognise the types of actors and activities implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as testing the veracity of the conflict transformation

framework for the region. However, alternative approaches, particularly those related to ethnic reconciliation will be considered to identify certain approaches in BiH, and their efficacy.

3. Challenges to Reconciliation

Reconciliation faces many challenges as reoccurring conflicts or a negative peace environment in many parts of the world demonstrate. These challenges are discussed in the following subsection, where particular attention is given to those specific to ethnic conflict and reconciliation.

The first challenge tackled by many scholars and practitioners is the contradiction between truth-telling, justice, and reconciliation. Justice and truth processes are important to uncover the extent of past crimes, allocate reparations to the victims, and prosecute the perpetrators (Pankhurst 1999, 244–46). Humphrey (2003, 497) points out the need to choose between trials for a justice process or commissions for truth-telling, and the one that would favour reconciliation. Truth-telling is notably considered to reopen old wounds instead of fostering reconciliation (Franović 2008, 21; 26; Pankhurst 1999; Kriesberg and Dayton 2012, 309).

The concept of forgiveness, which a reconciliation process requires, has been particularly difficult in justice and truth processes, as shown by Pankhurst (1999) in the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions of South-Africa where amnesty was granted to many perpetrators to the dismay of victims. Forgiveness is also a deeply personal process, perhaps ill-adapted to be "forced" by a commission or tribunal. Furthermore, the theological disagreement on whether forgiveness is about the victim showing mercy (Christianity) or about the perpetrator repenting (Islam) may also present difficulties in a multi-confessional Bosnia-Herzegovina (Auerbach 2005, 479).

Clark (2008, 334) further argues that internationalised trials are inappropriate to reach reconciliation because they are too far removed from the affected society, and their procedures too convoluted. Domestic courts are also frustrating to victims, because many victims will never be heard, due to the fragile post-conflict judiciary that does not have the means to charge everyone (Franović 2008, 22).

Some of these statements on the challenging contradiction between reconciliation and forgiveness, truth-telling and justice, and international trials, can also apply to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The International Criminal Tribunal on the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was

established in 1993 during the wars in the former Yugoslavia by the UN Security Council (UNSC) to prosecute perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity (Humphrey 2003, 495). However, some deemed the prosecution partial by some because its focus seem to lay on crimes committed by Serb officers (Clark 2008, 337). The Tribunal's outreach was also insufficient as BiH citizens expressed they were not informed about how the ICTY functioned. Thus, the ICTY was too impersonal an institution and lacked legitimacy for creating an unambiguous narrative of the war and a base for reconciliation (Clark 2008, 334). A more in-depth analysis of the ICTY is provided in a following chapter because of its particularities and importance for Bosnia and Herzegovina's post-war development.

Therefore, the case of BiH was an attempt at compromising between the different objectives of justice, peace, truth, and mercy, but ultimately the ICTY seems to be one of the reasons that reconciliation remains so challenging today. This research will further delve into what experts in BiH identify as the objectives necessary for reconciliation and how to balance them more efficiently, without sacrificing one or the other.

Nevertheless, arguably the main challenge of reconciliation in BiH was the ethnic framing of the conflict in the reconciliation process. International organisations are accused of having exceedingly focused on ethnicity as a dividing factor in Bosnia-Herzegovina when addressing reconciliation. In fact, everyday citizens often get along fine with their fellow citizens and neighbours of other ethnicities and become annoyed by foreign actors pushing the need for ethnic reconciliation (Keranen 2014, 135–36). Instead, citizens claim that it is the political elite that continues to create divisions (Franović 2008, 24).

When ethnicity takes up a frontal place in the conflict, and certain symbols are determined to identify one's own ethnic group and identity, the political elite uses this symbolism to mobilise the masses, as well as taking the opportunity to make violent and hateful discourses, often based on myths about other ethnic groups to incite fear. As a result, compromising and mediation to resolve the conflict becomes much more complicated, because the actors of the conflict are not rational actors who can be satisfied by addressing purely material interests, but are now in conflict over values and their identity (Kaufman 2006; Kelman 2007; Baird 1999; Azar and Haddad 1986, 1341). Political elites who profited from this symbolism are now stuck in a "symbolic politics trap" they can no longer de-escalate the conflict and detach their political message from ethnicity, identity, and symbolism (Kaufman 2006, 202).

In BiH, the importance of symbolic identification persevered after the war, competing symbols of identity maintaining the division between ethnic groups at a symbolic level. As

such, symbols representing the common national identity of BiH citizens are less frequently displayed than symbols representing Bosniak, Croat, and Serb ethnic groups, or even rejected by them, such as the national flag. Even symbols that should express national unity, such as currency, language, or street names, are different in each regional entity by representing historical figures from each ethnic group rather than a national one (Keranen 2014, 128; 137–38; 140). Part of this research will focus how to overcome these challenges proper to BiH.

B. Common Cooperation Strategies between Civil Society Actors

Generally, the actors involved in resolving a conflict are countless: from humanitarian aid organisations, to mediating foreign states, and international governmental organisations (IGOs). They all play a role in resolving the conflict and rebuilding divided communities, but not in the same way. Although IGOs and states are often in the spotlight, lesser-known actors from civil society are often present, and scholars have frequently expressed the importance of civil society intervention (Lederach 1997).

The definition of civil society actors this research is based on is further explained in the methodological chapter while this section focuses more on their methods and cooperation.

1. Common Strategies of Cooperation between Civil Society Actors

The following section describes the role of civil society actors and their most prevalent cooperation strategies in BiH. Several trends in these cooperation strategies can be identified when examining how local and international actors work together.

To implement the conflict transformation framework, Lederach (1997, 38; 43) sees society as a pyramid of three levels of actors, with a series of corresponding actions they can undertake most efficiently. The top-level, Track I, actors are political or military leaders who negotiated the peace agreements and initiated top-down reconciliation processes. They are often highly visible in the media, which can constrain their freedom in negotiation processes, and are the main interlocutors of international actors. These actors are mostly concerned in top-down peacebuilding with the help of powerful mediators, such as the United Nations, to achieve a ceasing of hostilities (1997, 38–41; 44–46; Reimann 2004, 4–5). Lederach (1997, 41) stresses that in BiH hierarchy was blurred and top-level actors with exclusive power in the state were

not easily identified. As a consequence, international actors negotiated with various levels of actors in the pyramid.

Track II or middle level actors also hold a position of leadership without being connected or under the control of the Track I actors, such as, but not limited to, ethnic or religious leaders, NGO directors, or scholars. Although less visible, their role in resolving conflict is crucial as their strengths lie in creating networks and relations with both Track I and Track II actors from all sides of the conflict because they do not have to be constrained by political factions. Their methods of reconciliation can be grouped into three categories: problem-solving workshops, peace commissions, and conflict resolution training (Lederach 1997, 41–43; 46). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Track II actors are perhaps best represented by interethnic and multireligious organisations such as the Interreligious Council of BiH, established in 1997 for the purpose of dialogue and reconciliation ('Međureligijsko Vijeće u Bosni i Hercegovini', n.d.), or the regional commission for the establishment of facts about war crimes and other serious violations of human rights (RECOM), a network launched in 2006 of NGOs in all former Yugoslav states ('Recom', n.d.).

Finally, Track III actors are grassroot leaders who face daily survival struggles related to the conflict and mostly focus on providing relief services for their population. They understand the needs of the population and politics, but also experience the immediate practical results of top-level decisions. Through a bottom-up approach, these actors use preexisting structures such as religious institutions and associations to deal with the trauma of the conflict and promote reconciliation (Lederach 1997, 42–43; 51–55). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, an example of this type of actor would be the Lara foundation from Bijeljina, established in 1998 to foster reconciliation through female empowerment ('Fondacija "Lara" Bijeljina', n.d.), or Most Mira from Prijedor, opened in 2008, to encourage peace through youth and art programs ('MOST MIRA - Centre for Sustainable Peace', n.d.).

Consequently, although all three types of actors contribute to peace, Lederach specifically mentions the grassroot leadership to be involved in reconciliation, while Track II is better suited to fostering sustainable peace and Track I to conflict resolution. Reimann (2004, 6) agrees with Lederach by attributing similar types of activities. As such, Track III actors attributes an active role to the local population and can implement more effective strategies for deep structural change and long-term reconciliation (Reimann 2004, 11–12).

Gawerc (2006, 462) also raises some interesting questions regarding the Track III approach, or the people-to-people initiatives. This author admits more research needs to be done on whether Track III actors can effectively promote reconciliation goals even during times of

conflict, how they adapt their priorities and objectives depending on the context, how they can be supported, and how they in turn can influence Track I and II actors (Gawerc 2006, 462–64). These unanswered and rarely explored questions related to Track III actors and their role in conflict transformation will be investigated in the course of this research project.

Regarding cooperation, a common method is offering financial assistance to domestic CSOs, often from international CSOs, because they have better access to resources (Mastrorocco 2020, 89). The international actors take on the role of donors and may set a few expectations and deadlines for the local CSO projects to fulfil, but the donor's role remains limited in the actual implementation of the projects. Although, an international organisation can also choose to focus on technical assistance and trainings, enhancing CSO capacity, or provide moral support to local peace activists to persevere in their mission, rather than providing financial assistance (2020, 92; Franović 2008, 41). Fagan's (2005) research on BiH's civil society confirms the positive role international CSOs play in encouraging cooperation between CSOs and governmental actors through financial pressure, and providing capacity-building trainings. This echoes Mastrorocco's research (2020, 90; 92–93) on the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and its role within the development of civil society in the Western Balkans, also showing its effective advocacy for smaller CSOs by pressuring government actors or creating a platform for dialogue and networking.

Earlier research on CSOs in BiH by Puljek-Shank and Verkoren (2017, 198) shows that local and international CSOs are also appreciated by local communities when working together through a problem-solving approach, and producing tangible results.

Thus, the literature shows how international actors can and have efficiently cooperated with domestic civil society in BiH and on the topic of reconciliation. However, little is said about how the various domestic civil society organisations within BiH actually cooperate, and how they can improve their networks. Filling this gap in the literature is one of the key aims of the present research.

2. Challenges to International and Local CSO Cooperation

The civil society arena in BiH faces various challenges when it comes to cooperation, whether they attempt to cooperate with domestic, international, non-governmental or governmental actors.

Many mention their role as financial donors which leads to rendering domestic CSOs fully dependent on international actors and answering their demands, and thus potentially harming the domestic CSOs legitimacy as local actors representing their constituents' needs and interests (Fagan 2005; Mastrorocco 2020; Puljek-Shank and Verkoren 2017).

Furthermore, the intervention of international organisations is not always well construed since their knowledge of existing local practices is often insufficient. International CSOs prefer to import new strategies, rather than working with more technical local expertise, improving local ownership and pre-existing systems (Maglajlic and Stubbs 2018, 45–46). Yet another challenge resulting from the lack of local knowledge, is that intervening international actors can potentially distort political competition by unknowingly financing, and legitimising, warlords or oligarchs (Pankhurst 1999, 247).

Moreover, Lai's (2016, 362) research in BiH has shown that international civil society often disregarded socio-economic rights and reforms, focusing mostly on political reconciliation, without addressing the distress and frustration resulting from socio-economic grievances of the population.

This said, the blame does not only lie with international actors. For instance, BiH civil society has been described as apathic and lacking initiative, not only because of its past under a socialist regime where civic activism was not tolerated, but also because activists fear retributions from local authorities (Seixas 2013, 76). Grassroot organisations are also wary of BiH NGOs, something which became evident during the 2014 protests when social movements and NGOs refused to organise themselves jointly, despite both promoting democratisation (Puljek-Shank and Fritsch 2019, 145).

Thus, both international and domestic civil society, although recognising each other's merits, mutually express frustrations about one another. The research will focus on unravelling these frustrations, and what these actors suggest is needed to improve their relationship.

In conclusion, the analysis in this chapter shows that the academic debate on both reconciliation and civil society is far from settled, particularly when examining BiH and the different interpretations of the conflict, the ethnic divide, and the responsibilities of the involved actors. The literature showcases several gaps and debates that this research attempts to answer, such as determining effective reconciliation strategies or how to improve civil society cooperation.

II. Research Methodology

This chapter details the empirical and qualitative design of the research, chosen for its ability to explore personal motivations in more nuanced ways to shed light on the misunderstandings of gaps in the relevant literature.

A. Research Design

To attempt to understand how civil society actors in BiH experience the cooperation with other domestic or international organisations, and how their personal experiences have shaped their perception of reconciliation, the principal research design in the present work is the qualitative method.

The humanistic focus in this research design aims at constructing a bottom-up theory that takes into account the process of attributing a meaning to an experience, rather than only analysing the resulting experience (Muzari, Nevers Shava, and Shonhiwa 2022, 14–16). Unlike the quantitative approach, the qualitative methodology allows for more flexibility and assumes subjectivity in the object of study, without necessarily needing a logical deduction to be expressed in statistics (Mehrad and Tahriri Zangeneh 2019, 4). The two objects of this research, reconciliation and cooperation, are intrinsically linked to the ethnic division and categories that make up Bosnia and Herzegovina. Based on historical evidence of fluctuating definitions and status of these categories, ethnicity cannot be considered as a static external social phenomenon, but rather as a social construct influenced by individuals who make up these ethnic categories (Oddie 2012, 34–35), and subsequently influence the reconciliation process between these ethnic categories. Thus, this research uses a constructivist, not objectivist, ontological approach (Bryman 2016, 29–30).

When using a qualitative research design, the research strategy is more likely to be based on inductive thinking, using interpretivism as an epistemological approach, and constructivist ontology. Interpretivism refuses to approach social sciences as a natural science and focuses on understanding the object of study, rather than explaining it. For the same reason, an empirical qualitative design was chosen because it allows the researcher to focus on people's experiences and how these experiences can serve to build a new theory, rather than using assumptions based on a previous theory of reconciliation and civil society (Bryman 2016, 23–32).

B. Participants

This research focuses on civil society actors and their experiences in BiH, so it is necessary to define what constitutes a civil society organisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Because of the variety of definitions, the choice was made to adopt a vast, concrete, and non-exhaustive definition to include most of the different organisations that are present in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Such a definition is particularly useful to include smaller organisation, with a less formalised structure that could have been overlooked despite their contribution to reconciliation.

First, Mercer (2002) makes a distinction between NGOs and Grassroot Organisations (GROs), and considers both as part of the overarching group of CSOs. Mercer (2002, 6) considers that, on the one hand, NGOs are well-organised and funded, their staff are experts, and they operate mostly at international, national, and regional levels. These organisations are often more visible because they have the resources to partner with international actors and implement stronger outreach strategies. The author also identifies a miscellaneous category of organised social groups as a part of civil society, ranging from trade unions to religious groups to think tanks, which do not necessarily fit into either category of NGO or GRO (Mercer 2002, 6).

However, Fisher's definition (2011a) of NGOs in BiH states that, "non-profit organisations active in development and humanitarian aid, human rights advocacy and peace work on international, regional and local levels", whilst CSOs are involved in more broadly voluntary common activities to enhance state building (Fischer 2011a, 288–89). This definition ignores other types of associations, such as sport clubs, environmental protection groups, and academic associations, which may all directly or indirectly contribute to reconciliation are relevant to Bosnia and Herzegovina's associative arena and make up the majority of civil society in BiH (Stojanovic, Seizovic, and Pucar 2022, 43). These CSOs are also included in BiH civil society reports, the national CSO database, as well as the non-exhaustive definition of the European Union of CSOs, which is a list of possible types of organisations (Stojanovic, Seizovic, and Pucar 2022, 12; Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations 2022, 6; 'Zbirni E-Registar Udruženja i Fondacija u BiH' 2024).

Thus, this paper's definition of CSOs is based on all organisations registered in the national registry of associations and foundations ('Zbirni E-Registar Udruženja i Fondacija u BiH'

2024), which includes (but is not limited to) NGOs, teaching associations, universities, research organisations, and environmental organisations.

A distinction should also be made between international and domestic civil society as done by Crocker (1998, 509) in his research on civil society. When referring to domestic civil society, this research refers to organisations of which the members are predominantly BiH citizens, unlike international CSOs.

Furthermore, an additional division can be made within the category of international CSOs. On the one hand, there are organisations based and composed of citizens of a single country but operating in BiH, for instance ForumZFD (Germany) and Centre André Malraux (France). On the other hand, there are international organisations that are transnational and do not belong to a single country, such as UN agencies and the OSCE.

Members of these different types of CSOs were interviewed, and although it is unlikely that a researcher would be able to conduct enough interviews to be statistically representative, specific sampling methods were used to counter this faulty representativity. This is even more important in BiH where answers may strongly vary depending on ethnicity, type of organisation, or geographical area of operation. A combination of three sampling methods was used: quota sampling and snowball sampling, which are non-probability or non-random sampling techniques (Knott et al. 2022, 2; Muzari, Nevers Shava, and Shonhiwa 2022, 17).

Quota sampling is selecting participants because they meet certain conditions to represent a larger population. In this research on Bosnia-Herzegovina, this means selecting participants from all three constituent ethnic groups, from both urban and rural areas, as well as a few foreign actors who are working in the region. Snowball sampling is asking participants to identify other potential participants, reaching out to groups that are difficultly accessible, such as rural civil society actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Finally, convenience sampling is choosing participants because they are available and easily accessible. This is a criticised sampling method because it may lead to bias and generalisation, but it allows a researcher to start somewhere and sample other participants through quotas and snowballing afterwards (Muzari, Nevers Shava, and Shonhiwa 2022, 16–17). Therefore, the first interviewees were from very visible NGOs in Sarajevo. This bias and generalisation created by urban participants was then countered by focusing on rural actors through snowball sampling.

Some of the interviewees did not consider themselves part of civil society, or at least not entirely, because they worked in an international organisation. Nevertheless, their previous

experience in CSOs provided them with great insight on what it is to operate and cooperate in the civic space of BiH on topics such as reconciliation.

Since qualitative analysis allows for a progressive selection of participants during the research, rather than having a pre-planned sample (Mehrad and Tahriri Zangeneh 2019, 6), this proves once again that a qualitative design is more suitable to select participants throughout a research process, especially when using snowball sampling and previous interviewees determining future ones.

The number of interviews depended both on obtaining interviews from all ethnic groups, as well as observing whether there was any form of saturation – if the same answers were being given throughout various interviews between interviewees with similar characteristics. The results are based on a sample of thirteen semi-structured interviews with six female and seven male participants between the ages of 25 and 60, and interview times ranging between 30 minutes and two hours depending on the interviewee's schedule. Four interviewees were not BiH citizens, and of the other nine, five were Bosniak, two were Serb, one Croat, and one of mixed ethnic heritage (Figure 1). All were highly educated with at least a university master's degree, obtained in BiH or abroad. From the BiH interviewees, five are working in rural areas, whilst five are based in Sarajevo; five Bosniak interviewees worked in a local office of a larger international organisation, whilst five worked in domestic NGOs or other associations. The foreign interviewees all worked for foreign CSOs or international organisations (Figure 2). Although the majority of the interviewees worked specifically on peace or reconciliation, the others focused more indirectly on reconciliation through capacity building, environmental protection, youth, democratisation, and inclusion. This mix of participants allows the research to compare between international and domestic actors, rural and urban, generations, and ethnic groups.

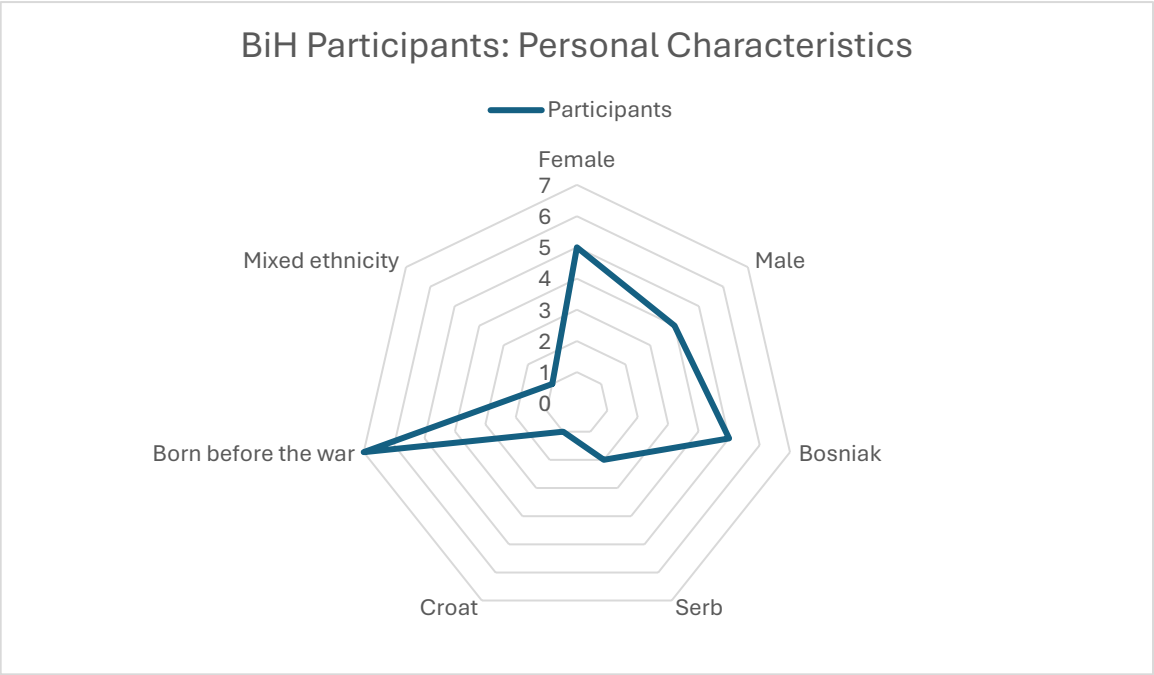

Figure 1: Age, gender, and ethnicity composition of the interviewees from BiH.

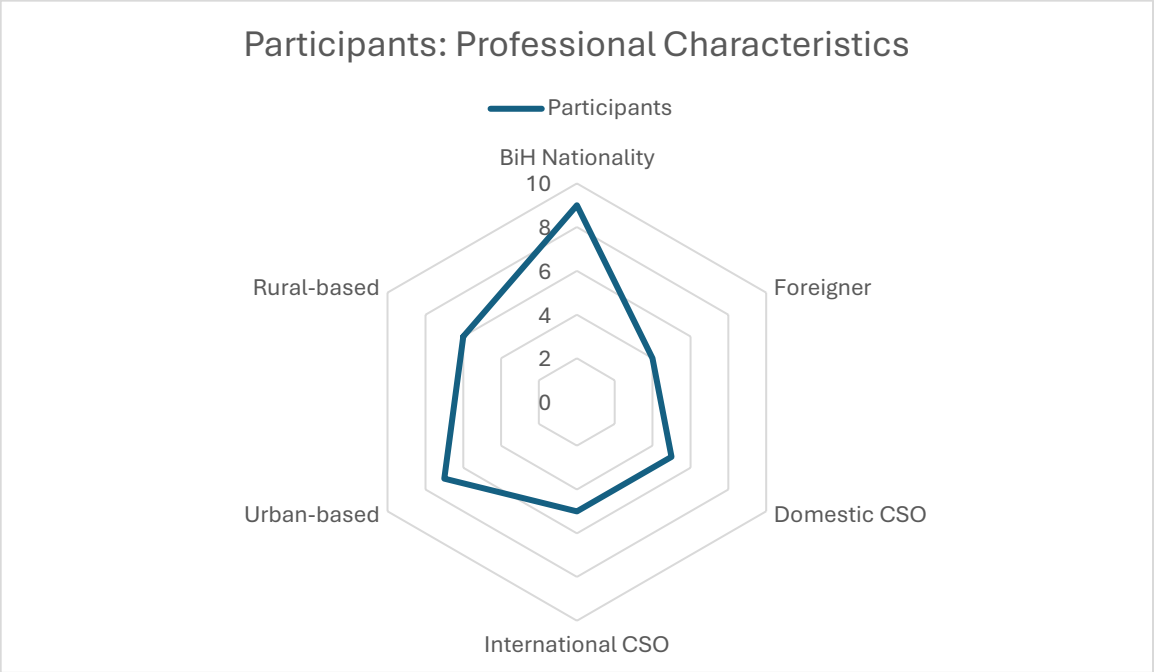

Figure 2: Origin, type of organisation, and place of operation of all interviewees.

C. Data Collection and Analysis

The main method of data collection in a qualitative design is the use of interviews because they use a direct and verbal approach of data collection.

Interviews are most suitable to understand what the participants of the research project think and allow to go more in depth into more specific topics. Depending on the type of

interview, the researcher has some freedom in the types of question they can prepare for. The most frequently used form, and the one for this research, is the semi-structured interview (Muzari, Nevers Shava, and Shonhiwa 2022, 17; Knott et al. 2022, 1). This form of interview uses similar sets of open questions for each interviewee, as well as the researcher's new questions adapted to the interviewee's answer and background.

A similar line of questioning was used for each interview, beginning the interviewee introduction, to explain why they decided to work for their particular organisation. This also allowed the interviewer to follow up on the interviewee's experience with more adequate questions regarding both the research and the interviewee's experience. After discussing several aspects of reconciliation and cooperation, interviewees were asked to give concluding thoughts on more abstract questions, such as "What does reconciliation mean to you?" or "How can cooperation of CSOs in BiH be improved?". Not only did this provide a link between the interviewee's experience and the literature on reconciliation, but this also allowed the interviewee to single out what their main concerns were on reconciliation and cooperation. This kind of evolution of questions - from concrete to more abstract - makes it easier for the researcher to ask questions relevant to the interviewee, and guides the interviewee into the topics of the researcher (Knott et al. 2022, 3).

Regarding, the data analysis, Graue (2015, 8) states that the analysis of qualitative data is a process of framing the data, classifying it and finally, connecting elements of the data to describe, interpret and explain the results. This analysis usually follows fours steps: data collection, reduction, explanation, and verification or drawing a conclusion (Graue 2015, 12–13).

Thus, the recorded interviews were first transcribed, whilst paying attention to how the verbal interaction is transformed by using certain punctuation forms or mishearing certain elements. The constructivist approach focusses on the hesitation, the repetition, and other aspects of speech, needing them to be included in the transcript (Knott et al. 2022, 6). The interviewer's questions and reactions were also written down to properly contextualise responses. However, because most interviewees and the researcher were not speaking in their native language but using English to tackle controversial and complex topics of BiH politics, hesitations or word repetitions are bound to be frequent on both sides of the interview. Thus, these particular hesitations will not be transcribed as they are an issue of language competency, and do not contribute significantly to the results.

In two cases, the interview was voluntarily translated by local CSO activists. The research results are based on the transcription, which is in English and considers the nuances of language and translation. Therefore, some sentences were not translated literally, or word for word, to better reflect the meaning of interviewee and interviewer. More on this subject in the section on limitations.

Regarding data processing, this research uses thematic analysis to identify and interpret recurring themes (Knott et al. 2022, 6), allowing to determine certain trends in the answers of different categories of interviewees. The use of open-ended coding methods rather than *a priori* will allow the themes to appear during the process, continuing in the inductive strategy (Castleberry and Nolen 2018, 809). Open-endedness is necessary to accurately name and explain the themes in grassroot organisations' answers because they do not necessarily use the concepts established in academic literature or professional NGOs.

Nowel, Norris, White and Moules (2017) outline a step-by-step approach to thematic analysis, used in this research, based on the definition of thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006, 80). After familiarising oneself with the interviews, already identifying potential patterns and comparisons, the data was coded by identifying separate concepts, which do not overlap, and categorising the data into these concepts. Not overlapping does not exclude the possibility of hierarchical coding, which is useful to identify multiple concepts with adjacent meanings and which can be regrouped under an overarching concept (Nowell et al. 2017).

Then, the researcher can identify themes, i.e. significant concepts that are recurring in the coding process. As stated, these themes are chosen inductively here, which means they are data driven. Finally, these themes are analysed separately to determine whether they accurately reflect the data. Themes are also put in relation with one another to identify patterns (Nowell et al. 2017).

This research hence primarily depends on an inductive thematic analysis of the data to observe recurring grievances or good practices civil society experts have witnessed in BiH. The goal is to observe whether there are any significant trends in results between the various civil society actors, allowing the data to speak for itself, rather than the researcher assuming the meaning of certain concepts through a pre-established theoretical framework. Practices that have previously been misunderstood or overlooked may emerge this way.

D. Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

Testing the reliability of this research lays in the repetition of the same line of questioning with similar civil society actors. Although interviewees present their own subjective truth, similarities in their professional and/or personal experience are likely to result in similar answers, proving the consistency of the results and the possibility of other researchers to reproduce this experiment (Bhattacherjee 2012, 56).

Focusing on defining concepts in each interview is also a guarantee of the higher validity of the data. This is in accordance with Bhattacherjee's suggestion (2012, 58) to test validity through an adequate indicator to represent a theoretical construct. Therefore, the understanding of reconciliation by each interviewee is key to comprehend whether interviewees consider reconciliation in a similar way, or whether they use another term. By clearly defining the concept, future researchers can also more accurately understand what was meant in this project, and whether it corresponds to what they wish to analyse.

With regards to the ethical dimension of this research, numerous measures were implemented to assure full confidentiality of the interviews and comply with ethical standards of research. This section explores which challenges and measures specifically needed to be taken, particularly in rural areas where interviewees can more easily identified in their community, or if the interviewee is part of a large international organisation and must tread carefully when expressing political opinions.

In addition to the ethical guidelines set forth by the University of Glasgow, this research incorporates the following ethical factors suggested by Knott, Rao, Summers, and Teeger (2022, 4), which every researcher should consider before or after an interview: harm minimisation; informed consent; anonymity; confidentiality; reflexivity; and positionality. Harm minimisation and informed consent are particularly important to set before the interview, by predicting the potential harm that both the participant or research can suffer during or after the interview. The harm will depend on the context of the interview, such as the political regime or social norms. This potential harm, as well as other privacy concerns such as anonymisation, need to be made aware to the interviewee beforehand so they can consent in full knowledge of cause (Knott et al. 2022, 4–5).

Confidentiality also requires the researcher to appropriately store the research data after the interview by using encryption and password protection along with anonymisation. Positionality and reflexivity refer to the researcher's own background which can colour their understanding

of participants and lead to assumption, as well as how participants view the researcher. A key factor is for interviewees not to feel judged by the interviewer (Knott et al. 2022, 5).

The research project adheres to the ethical guidelines set forth by the University of Glasgow whose ethical commission approved the research methodology before its implementation and attaches great importance to these ethical standards. This involved securing a safe location for the interviews, a closed setting in a professional environment such as a conference room in CSO offices or on university premises, with respectful distance between participant and researcher, both in a physical and emotional sense. This allows both confidentiality and minimising physical harm of both the researcher and participant. Some interviews were held in public spaces on request of the interviewee, and the researcher agreed because the space was sufficiently public to be safe.

Furthermore, all participants were previously informed and consented in writing to the recording of their interviews under the condition that their names would be pseudonymised in the final project, their personal data destroyed after the project was submitted, and the research data kept in a password protected file on an encrypted memory stick.

Considering some participants are part of relatively small civil society organisations or rural areas, they could be identified if their organisation is mentioned. Therefore, only the characteristics of the organisations and places of work will be mentioned, no actual names will be. These measures assure informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality.

To minimise potential harm in a psychological sense, participants were given the contact information of an organisation of therapists in Sarajevo that specialise in trauma related to the war because interviewees are asked about their personal involvement as well as their professional background. Participants were also informed they could stop the interview and say something off the record or contact the researcher later on to revise their statement or withdraw their consent. Some participants used this prerogative to express their views more freely, without having to risk their employment or social reputation. Their wishes have been respected in the sense that no transcription exists of that part of their interview. The interviewer attempted to create a relaxed setting by sharing personal experiences, and agreeing with interviewees, to guarantee equal footing and trust between both parties of the interview. This approach guaranteed interviewees did not feel judged by the interviewer and encouraged them to express their experience and opinions freely.

E. Limitations

The research design and external factors, such as the subjectivity of both interviewer and interviewee, the language barrier, and limited time, presented several limitations to research. This mostly affected the sample, but measures were undertaken to minimise the effects of these limitations.

First, the researcher must critically approach the data to avoid bias that could affect the credibility of the research (Muzari, Nevers Shava, and Shonhiwa 2022, 15–16). It is important to keep linking responses of interviewees with concepts from the literature during the analysis to maintain a sense of objectivity and distance in the analysis.

Additionally, the sample size being rather small, as is often the case with interviews and because of the difficulty reaching out to certain types of interviewees, various types of CSOs were contacted. Some organisations did not address reconciliation directly, but their work indirectly did contribute to the process. The difficulty lay mostly in contacting grassroot organisations who only used small-scale social media outreach strategies in the local language and were wary of outsiders trying to contact them. The unresponsiveness of many organisations cast doubt on whether they were still active or if they were simply too busy to participate in the research. Nevertheless, the lack of representativity was countered by snowball sampling, and reflected by the saturation in interviewee responses reflected, as mentioned previously.

As also mentioned earlier, the interviews were mainly conducted in English, and sometimes with a translator present. This presented certain limitations, since English was not the native language of most participants, sometimes creating difficulties to understand one another because of small grammar or syntax mistakes. Nevertheless, this limitation is countered by the repeated request of the interviewer to the interviewees to reformulate or specify what was meant exactly, to avoid misunderstandings. English is also often the language used in a professional setting by the interviewees, so the knowledge and vocabulary related to reconciliation and other professional activities is still used with a certain ease in English. The language barrier remained a limitation to reach out to rural CSOs, which could only be fully countered when Bosnian CSO activists were willing to mediate and translate but weren't always available.

The data may also seem unreliable because of the subjectivity of both interviewer and interviewee (Bhattacherjee 2012, 56), and depending on how a question is formulated, an interviewee may respond differently. Therefore, a significant part of each interview is dedicated to letting the interviewee explain and define what they mean by using these

ambiguous terms, such as peace, reconciliation, trust, and conflict resolution. This subjectivity is doubled during two interviews where a translator was preset since they undoubtedly unconsciously filtered out some information, highlighted other information, and used potentially imperfect translations of certain terms.

These measures and recommendations should limit the bias in the research, although bias can never be inexistent when studying subjective topics such as reconciliation and cooperation. These measures should also allow the research to be repeated in other areas, at least in the rest of the Western Balkans, and potentially generalise the results of this research to the rest of the region.

In conclusion, this research methodology adopts an empirical and qualitative approach to investigate the practical implementation of reconciliation efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and to understand the challenges underlying reconciliation and cooperation. The selection of this methodology is justified by the need to explore the nuanced experiences and motivations of various actors involved in reconciliation efforts, particularly in a context marked by ethnic divisions and historical conflict. By drawing on interpretivist and constructivist frameworks, the research embraces a bottom-up approach to theory-building, focusing on understanding lived experiences and attributions of meaning.

III. Case Study of Post-War Bosnia-Herzegovina: International Intervention and Anchoring of Ethnic Divide

Before tackling the findings of the research, several points regarding concerns raised in the literature need to be addressed, and a context to the findings of the subsequent chapter, in relation to the complex political and social context of Bosnia-Herzegovina should be presented. Although discussing the entirety of the 1992-1995 war and all its consequences is impossible, a few select themes are discussed because of their importance in post-war and today's political scene of BiH and their connection to this research.

The first theme is the immediate aftermath of the war, namely the Dayton Peace Agreement and its direct consequences. This helps to shed light on the local perception of the international community and state actors and explains the reason behind the current controversial education and ethnic division.

The second theme is directly linked to transitional justice and reconciliation, the establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Although established during the war, its debated status and verdicts have created disagreements amongst ethnic communities in BiH, as well as between the other involved ex-Yugoslav states. The role played by the ICTY pertaining to reconciliation will hopefully showcase why today certain approaches to reconciliation are completely rejected and alternative strategies are necessary.

A. Bosnia and Herzegovina according to the Dayton Peace Agreement: A Permanent Temporary Solution

The former Yugoslavia was a federation made up of six republics with a multitude of ethnic groups which were coexisting peacefully, although latent ethnic tensions were being ignored or hidden behind the country's motto "Brotherhood and Unity" (Mulalić and Korkut 2009, 108). However, along with the end of the Cold War and economic crisis in several republics, these ethnic tensions resulted in the communist ideology being replaced by ethnonationalist

propaganda (Mulalıć and Korkut 2009, 108). Thus, despite the ethnic dimension of the conflict, there were actually several factors, such as decentralisation and economic hardship, which had weakened the unity of Yugoslavia and resulted in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

After several attempts to end the war and draft plans on the division of BiH, the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) was finally accepted on December 14, 1995, by the Presidents of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Izetbegović), Croatia (Tuđman), and Serbia (Milošević). Its main objective was to end the violence, prevent its resurgence in BiH or other ex-Yugoslav states, and establish new democratic institutions to support the post-war reconstruction (Mulalıć and Korkut 2009, 111). Thus, a new state was formed with a semi-presidential system, and three directly elected presidents representing the main ethnic communities, the constituent people (Mulalıć and Korkut 2009, 111). The following division of BiH was made: two entities, the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska (RS) and the Croat-Bosniak-dominated Federation of BiH (FBiH), with the latter controlling 2% more territory than the former, and the Brcko District (Mulalıć and Korkut 2009, 110–11) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: United States Central Intelligence Agency. Dayton agreement over areas of control, 24 November: Bosnia and Hercegovina. [Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 1995] Map. https://www.loc.gov/item/95685686/. Accessed 23/06/2024.

Then, the FBiH is again divided into ten cantons, which are again composed of various municipalities. Each canton is highly decentralised, with its own parliamentary, jurisdictions, and government with competences on key issues such as healthcare and education (Mulalıć and Korkut 2009, 111; Owen-Jackson 2008, 82) (Figure 4).

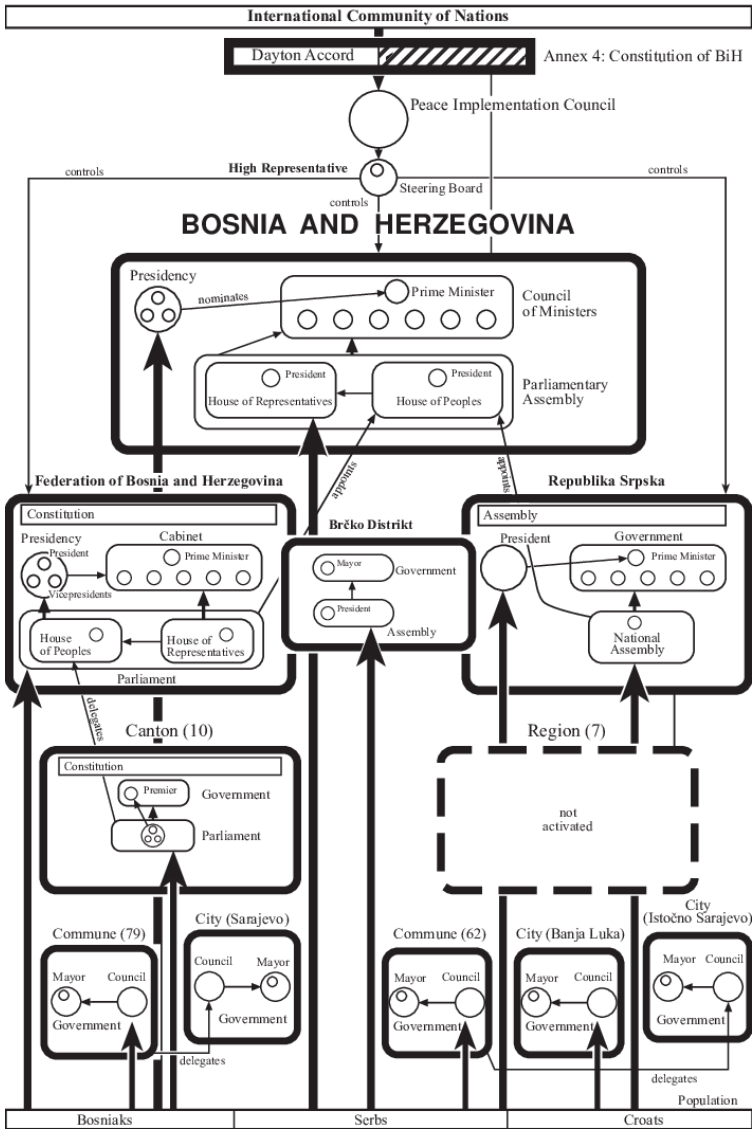

Figure 4: Jordan, P. (2016). Administrative regionalisation in the Adriatic Space. ISR-Forschungsberichte 38. 57-94. 10.1553/ISR_FB038s57. https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Bosnia-Herzegovinas-current-administrative-system_fig9_306521179. Accessed 23/06/2024.

The DPA has been heavily criticised for this particular ethnic and administrative division of the country because it has enabled nationalist politicians to continue the line of ethnopolitics in their constituencies (Mulalıć and Korkut 2009, 112; Owen-Jackson 2008, 85). Furthermore, the ethnic-based division also excludes anyone who does not wish to identify with one of the

major ethnic communities, for instance Jewish, Roma, or people with mixed heritage (Mulalıć and Korkut 2009, 116).

Furthermore, this drastically complicated the right to return of the two million refugees and internally displaced persons, which was guaranteed by Annex VII of the DPA. This right was often blocked by nationalist forces through intimidation. Returnees often constituted a minority after the war in previously mixed towns, because the population composition had become nearly mono-ethnic in places like Zvornik or Jajce. Others preferred relocating somewhere else in BiH out of fear or hatred to go back living with "the other" ethnic groups (Dahlman and Ó Tuathail 2005, 657–58). The DPA's right to return was countered by the legitimisation of the post-war ethnic division, separating people and creating mono-ethnic localities, decreasing contact between ethnic groups.

The DPA has also affected education by only giving the Federal Ministry of Education the ability to coordinate the canton ministries of education. Thus, each canton having near complete autonomy on the matter of education, and the ethnic division created by these cantons, education has become a tool of ethnonationalists to spread their ideology to the next generation. Three separate education systems coexist in the country, based on their national group of subjects and language, and dividing the children, resulting in promoting three drastically different historical narratives. In ethnically mixed (or more accurately ethnically divided) towns two-schools-under-one-roof were established. These schools and areas make a point of keeping children separate from one another, further insisting on each's own national group of subjects (Owen-Jackson 2008, 85–86; Plasto and Blagojević 2023, 46). Furthermore, the DPA is also incorrectly implemented regarding the right of children to learn about their cultural heritage and language when the child is part of the minority ethnic group in its canton. That child will receive the education meant for the majority ethnic group of the canton, or can choose to sit outside, and be isolated, during culturally-linked classes such as religion, leading to more discrimination based on ethnicity (Owen-Jackson 2008, 85; Plasto and Blagojević 2023, 47).

As such, the DPA did not explicitly establish the divided education system, but its ethnically based territorial organisation and the intense decentralisation of competences are the immediate causes of the current education system.

Furthermore, Bosnia-Herzegovina was put by the DPA under the tutelage of the Office of the High Representative (OHR). The office was meant to be a mediator assisting the civilian

implementation of the peace plan, but with subsequent reforms, particularly the 1997 reform during the Peace Implementation Council Conference, which attributed the "Bonn powers" to the OHR, authorised the Office to remove officials who violated BiH legislation, and impose laws if deemed necessary to implement the DPA when domestic institutions were failing to do so (Galić and Woelk 2023, 452–53). Although the use of Bonn powers has been limited since 2011, they were again used regarding politically sensitive matters since 2021. This caused an uproar in the RS because not only did the OHR criminally sanction the denial of genocide, but also amended the election laws on the evening of the 2022 elections (Galić and Woelk 2023, 455). This continued presence of the international community is criticised for its meddling and because other international organisations and Western countries have exceedingly urged for a liberalisation and democratisation (1992; Mulalıć and Korkut 2009, 113).

From the point of view of citizens and negotiators, the DPA has also been severely critiqued. The documentary "Looking for Dayton", made by Valery Perry (2020) of the Democratization Policy Council, showcases the difficulty for citizens to fathom the complex structure of the state and territorial organisation. Interviews with citizens point out the discontent about the DPA and the urgent need to reform the BiH Constitution based upon it. Experts, including former politicians, military personnel, and civil society actors, concur that the DPA was drafted with little understanding of the causes of the war and region, and although it ended the immediate humanitarian disaster, it prolonged the war and suffering.

In conclusion, the current political context has been intensely influenced by the DPA, and thus international intervention. The agreement directly and indirectly shaped BiH, institutionalising ethnic division, and is the source of many current problems regarding corruption, human rights, and even EU accession. Although the DPA was meant as a temporary solution by negotiators at the time, the system anchored itself in time, making it harder to step away from it. The research findings will attempt to elucidate how civil society actors face this challenging system, their reconciliation efforts being made in vain or attempting to overcome the system's hurdles.

B. Reconciliation and Justice in BiH: The Controverse of the ICTY

Bosnia-Herzegovina was the experimental ground for *ad hoc* international criminal tribunals, used in several other post-conflict areas afterwards. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) announced an era where transitional justice, rather than liberal peace theories, would be the main framework for post-conflict societies, and as such played an important role in the reconciliation process. However, this role was not solely positive, and its influence on the local perception of reconciliation strategies should not be underestimated.

In its resolution 827, the Security Council of United Nations in 1993 established the ICTY in response to the gravity of the violence committed in the former Yugoslavia and to address the violations of international humanitarian law (United Nations 1993). Its main objective was to hold those responsible accountable, presumably because national judicial systems could no longer be relied upon. Indirectly, the hopes were that this would lead to national reconciliation, implicitly linking justice and peace (Humphrey 2003, 495–96).

The effectiveness of the ICTY in its role as a mechanism of transitional justice, restoring justice and reconciliation, is considered limited by certain authors. For instance, Humphreys (2003, 500–501) criticises the dichotomy victim-perpetrator trials create, thus disincentivising reconciliation, as well as the political symbolism these criminal proceedings endure, unavoidably leading to a selectiveness in the cases judged so that the most responsible actors with the least refutable proof will be convicted.

However, Meernik and Guerrero (2014, 386–87) do point out that the ICTY also reduced the need for personal vengeance by convicting the main perpetrators, individualising guilt, offering a place for victims to express their suffering, and rebuilding the rule of law. Nevertheless, these authors also confessed that the literature on the ICTY, and international criminal courts in general, was rather pessimistic when it came to reconciliation. Hayden (2011) also argues that although in theory the ICTY, as a criminal court, could be effective in establishing a common narrative over which all sides could reconcile, this did not succeed in practice.

The literature is reflected by empirical findings within BiH through citizen polls and surveys. Despite the ICTY's attempt to establish a common fact-based narrative of the events of the war, Hodžić's (2011, 116) findings show that this has not stopped people from staunchly denying the crimes' veracity established by the ICTY. The author takes the example of

Omarska where the inhabitants denied all knowledge about the existence of a concentration camp, despite housing 5000 people of the town, and being involved in the first judgement of the ICTY, which pertained to Duško Tadić, one of the particularly brutal guards.

Klarin (2009) and Hayden (2011) extensively wrote about the overall negative perception of the ICTY in BiH, but also pointed out that the criticism had different causes. Regarding a survey conducted by the South Eastern Europe Public Agenda, Klarin argued that the general dislike and mistrust of Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs towards the ICTY was caused by its apparent bias against the members of their ethnic group. The media and politicians in Croatia and Serbia have also regularly criticised the ICTY, further influencing the perception of Croats and Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, even though Bosniaks were mainly the victims at the ICTY trials, they were also disappointed, mostly due to the trial procedures and lack of convictions. Nevertheless, Bosniaks are overall more positive about the ICTY because the tribunal did offer some degree of justice (Klarin 2009, 89–92). Similarly, a survey conducted in 2005 by Roland Kostić (2007, 317) showed that most Bosnian and Herzegovinians were nor inclined to forgive nor to forget, particularly those from the Bosniak and Serb ethnic communities.

It hence appears that the ICTY despite all its successes, also had a negative impact on reconciliation, by strengthening the victimisation narrative of each ethnic community (Hayden 2011, 320). This pessimistic conclusion of the ICTY in relation to post-war reconciliation may indicate why many civil society actors will have a negative opinion on international intervention, justice, and focussing on the past.

IV. Result Analysis: Stories from the Ground

This chapter aims to answer the two main research questions: what are efficient civil society reconciliation strategies for BiH and how can cooperation between civil society actors be improved? The collected data are presented according to main themes and followed by a short analysis of the results. Regarding the question of reconciliation, the aim was to confirm or infirm the existing literature, and perhaps adapt it to the specific situation in BiH. Concerning cooperation between different levels of civil society organisations in BiH, the objective was to focus more on the themes which emerged from the interviews since the literature on how to cooperate in general is relatively rare, and mostly limited to criticism regarding cooperation in BiH.

A. Defining Reconciliation and its Implementation Challenges in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina

1. Defining Elements of Reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

As one of the principal questions, interviewees were asked directly about their definition of reconciliation. Indirect defining elements of reconciliation could also be identified in the interviews when interviewees mentioned what they considered as the main problems faced by Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as their roots and solutions. Definitions of reconciliation varied greatly and often incorporated many elements which are also present in the literature. For instance, all interviewees agreed that reconciliation in BiH was both a process and an outcome, and that it could be defined as both an interpersonal and societal process.

Nevertheless, two main themes emerged from the thematic analysis of data. First, part of the interviewees perceived reconciliation as a concept which should focus on the future, whilst other interviewees linked reconciliation with a process of healing and related to the past. Secondly, many interviewees mentioned that the ethnic lens was an inaccurate framework for reconciliation and using it could even negatively impact the reconciliation process.

a. Disagreement on the Past and Future Dimension of Reconciliation

The following section showcases the dichotomy between CSO staff in BiH as the urban interviewees, often Bosniak and working in NGOs, who focus on the psychological and past dimension of reconciliation, whilst international and rural interviewees focus on the future and pragmatic aspect. This dichotomy mirrors the definition and approach to reconciliation by Lederach (1997, 83), who urged to focus both on past and future for true conflict transformation.

Certain authors such as Strupinskiene (2017, 458) and Auerbach (Auerbach 2005, 474) described reconciliation as a process of healing from past trauma, a way of discussing and looking back at the past, with a strong psychological dimension colouring the process.

Six out of 13 interviewees from various backgrounds explicitly confirmed that reconciliation needed to address the past and healing to some degree. A civil society activist and current international organisation employee from Sarajevo said, "I think that for me it [reconciliation] was that war does not happen again, to do in the world what I can to prevent that these horrible things ever happen to anybody again" and "reconciliation for me is something that has happened in the past (Interview P5, 19/03/2024, Sarajevo)."

Several of these same interviewees also considered that the insufficient attention to understanding the psychological and healing aspects of reconciliation was a cause of the current lack of reconciliation. For instance, an interviewee from Sarajevo stated: "What happened after the war was a lot of organisations, international organisations, coming here and saying, "peace building", and they didn't give people enough time to mourn, which kind of backfired (Interview P1, 10/02/2024, Sarajevo)." This statement reflects frustration towards the international community in rushing the reconciliation process, which was also a criticism expressed by international interviewees.

Interestingly, interviewees focusing on the past dimension did not propose a concrete or homogenous strategy of how to address reconciliation, with statements such as "I believe it is a little bit too late for reconciliation as it is by the books. But something new has to come, or something new has to be presented (Interview P1, 10/02/2024, Sarajevo)." This reflects the difficulty of translating the philosophical and psychological dimension of reconciliation into a practical strategy.

However, an international CSO actor in Sarajevo also criticised the overestimation and over-focalisation of the past in defining and promoting reconciliation because this has led to a

constant narrative of victimisation of all parties in the war. This discourse is being manipulated by politicians and nationalist groups to deepen separations between ethnic communities in BiH according to the interviewee; this was also confirmed by Fischer's (2011a, 419) findings.

Other authors mentioned previously, including Franović (2008, 20), acquiesced that reconciliation should be future-oriented, focussing on rebuilding a state and a new form of relationship between citizens, with a bigger stress on the political unity of institutions and the state rather than only on the transformation of interpersonal relations, although the latter aspect is still present.

Again, interviewees from rural and international backgrounds advocated more for a future-oriented approach, building a more prosperous society together, with a stronger political focus on reconciliation rather than solely on its psychological aspects. For instance, one rural CS activist said, "Enough time has passed that we are now able to openly cooperate and consciously think about a better future for this country (Interview P4, 12/03/2024, Maglaj)". Similarly, international interviewees stated, "And so, after this you can call it reconciliation or not, but the question how the society gets out of the war, try to overcome or to deal with the consequences of the war (Interview P12, 14/03/2024, Sarajevo)", and "I mean, I guess there's lots of different ones but yeah coming to terms with what happened during the war and being able to sort of move on and move forward, trying to get people out of scapegoating, moving past the notion (Interview P13,07/03/2024)." These answers appear to agree on that the past should stay in the past, and the people's focus should be the future.

International interviewees suggested that reconciliation, to be effective, should be built upon a positively worded agenda with common objectives to rally people behind a common cause and strengthen social cohesion, which was lost during the war. "So, building solidarity behind a common agenda is what needs to be done. And I don't think it's even been conceptualised that way (Interview P10, 16/02/2024, Sarajevo)", as one international interviewee put it. The same suggestion is made by interviewees working in rural areas, but without framing it as a reconciliation project. This particularity is discussed in the next section.

Overall, this pragmatic-psychological, or future-past, dichotomy showcases a deeper separation present within the scene of CSOs working towards reconciliation in BiH. Although in theory, both the conflict and the future need to be addressed by all parties to move forward, as argued by Lederach (1997, 83), in practice it seems that combining both dimensions is much more difficult than expected because one side will criticise the approach of the other.

b. *The Inadequacy of the Ethnic Label to describe Ideological Differences and Acceptance*

The next section addresses the debate on using the "ethnic" label to describe the war and reconciliation process in BiH. In the literature (Baker 2015, 94–95; Keranen 2014, 131–32; Kaufman 2006, 201–2), it is suggested that ethnic reconciliation is a term that should not be used, or if it is, with extreme caution because it can freeze the lens of the conflict, and subsequent resolution, in that particular ethnic frame, when in fact the cause and solution to the conflict requires a more comprehensive view than solely addressing ethnic tensions. Overall, interviewees agreed that ethnicity was overestimated, but simultaneously its importance in society could not be ignored. Ethnicity is currently intrinsically linked with the narrative a person has internalised about the war. Therefore, looking at reconciling narratives or ideologies rather than at ethnicities, could be a more favourable framework, as was the attempt of the ICTY when it established the facts of the war and committed crimes.

Several participants agreed that ethnicity was overused. An international interviewee, for example, described reconciliation for BiH as "it would be a vision indeed, where people are not judged by their ethnicity, nationality, but on their attitudes, capacities, etcetera (Interview P12, 14/03/2024, Sarajevo)." Domestic CSO members also agreed that the "ethnic" label should not be used to describe reconciliation in BiH, stating for instance "Well, I believe that we need reconciliation without that prefix interethnic, ethnic (Interview P3, 05/04/2024, Sarajevo)." Instead, one interviewee from a rural area even suggested that regional belonging, as in the geographic location of one's hometown, was of more importance to them. As discussed later, territorial separation and geographic situation are significant factors impacting the reconciliation process.

Thus, if a label had to be chosen to describe the reconciliation process in BiH, "regional" or "territorial" might be more accurate. These terms better reflect how areas have become more closed off from each other, and thus, how social cohesion and cooperation for a shared future is being hindered. The same previously mentioned international interviewee suggested that the best course of action for reconciliation would be to stop escalating events by not attributing them an ethnic dimension, and to stop defining projects with ethnicised labels or symbols to stop fuelling the propaganda of nationalist political interest groups and media.

Similarly, a domestic CSO employee suggested that projects should stop focusing on including a certain number of members from each ethnic group. According to this interviewee, these types of projects assume that the target groups hate each other, and further emphasise the

differences between them. International interviewees agreed that basing audience on their ethnicity was merely reproducing what the ethnonationalist parties do.

However, some authors (Baird 1999; Kaufman 2006) did suggest that ethnicity should be included in the strategies of reconciliation, because of the symbolic role ethnicity has taken in society, and that it cannot be ignored. Ethnicity may even become a tool for reconciliation in BiH, because it has become so deeply entrenched with one's religious affiliation. Auerbach (2005, 472) even suggested that it can be a tool for reconciliation in certain cases.

Nearly all Bosnian interviewees mentioned ethnicity one way or another in relation to reconciliation, confirming that it does play an unavoidable role in the process. For instance, one Bosniak interviewee mentioned how the war in BiH was not rooted in ethnic hatred but did become this as ethnicity became a tool used to further the war efforts. This gradual, and perhaps inaccurate, framing of the war as an ethnic conflict was also mentioned by Baker (2015, 66) who urges scholars to observe the intra-ethnic tensions and economic competition present before and during the war.

Several interviewees, from both rural and urban areas, mentioned that they felt like everyone was put in a certain ethnic category by others, showcasing the consciously and unconsciously internalised ethnic bias, determining each's professional and personal relations . They shared: "Maybe it is not only connected, but in that moment, if you have a different ethnic background, then your first idea on why someone is treating me like that, would be that is because we are different ethnicity (Interview P3, 05/04/2024, Sarajevo)"; and also "I have always been seen as, you know, biased, no matter what am I doing, but they just ask where are you from, and thank you, this is enough, they just put you in the pot (Interview P8, 13/03/2024, Tuzla)."

As such, despite being criticized by many scholars and interviewees, the ethnic framework has also been internalized by many, leading to difficulties in conceptualizing alternative paradigms for the war and reconciliation. This concept is echoed by Kaufman's (2006) and Keranen's (2014) work on ethnic conflict, where they illustrate how symbolism and identity are dangerous tools for mobilizing communities, yet challenging narratives to escape once established. As a result, reconciliation in BiH does need to include a form of identity and ethnic dimension because the desired outcome of the reconciliation process is precisely the absence of perceived ethnic division and bias. How this can best be achieved is discussed in the next section, but many disagree on the appropriate solution.

A more appropriate framework or perception of reconciliation may be the reconciliation of narratives, the acceptance of different versions of history and different ideologies, allowing them to coexist. This was suggested by several interviewees and seems to contradict the legal definition and approach of reconciliation, based on establishing facts and one narrative of events, as was the goal of the ICTY mentioned earlier. However, this compromising approach allows people to accept differences of opinion and have a healthy debate, rather than a black or white vision of history, which reflects the psychological and cultural definitions of reconciliation, based on compromise and acceptance of different ideologies (Ugarriza and Nussio 2017, 4–5).

Several Bosnian interviewees mentioned that, for them, reconciling ideologies rather than ethnicities would be a more appropriate approach for BiH, because narratives vary between people within the same ethnic group and can be dependent on different regional backgrounds or experiences rather than on ethnicity. For instance, an interviewee from Sarajevo said, "So, in that sense, you can say it's ethnic conflict and we work on ethnic reconciliation, but if you want really to be correct, then we would say that we are trying to reconcile different narratives about the conflicts in Bosnia and situation now (Interview P5, 19/03/2024, Sarajevo)." The interviewee continued by stating that the aim of reconciling and accepting different narratives still allows the possibility to find common ground pertaining to the history of the country, without assuming that differences of opinion are linked to ethnicity. Specifically female Bosniak interviewees highlighted this approach, which they said was important to support the action of going towards the other, to support a psychological transformation, and to support the acceptance of different opinions. After all, similarities could unexpectedly still be found between narratives of vastly different regions upon which compromise, and relations can be built from then onwards. Nevertheless, the same interviewees made contradicting statements about the need to reconcile ideologies. Some interviewees did state that it was necessary to establish certain facts about the war about which there should be no uncertainty to build a compromise on, although this could lead to invalidating the narrative of some.

Interestingly, the focus on narratives and compromise on the past was mostly highlighted by Bosnian interviewees, and less by internationals. Although internationals did point out the need for reconciliation to be unlinked from ethnicity, the importance of one's narrative on the past in the process of reconciliation was not or only marginally mentioned. Thus, it appears that ultimately Bosnian CSO staff attaches more importance to the psychological aspect and past dimension of reconciliation than internationals do.

2. Common Challenges and Solutions relative to Reconciliation Strategies

a. The Taxonomy of Reconciliation Strategies and Their Effectiveness

This section tries to determine the diverse types of activities civil society has implemented in BiH and attempts to link them to the taxonomy of Nets-Zehngut but instead, adapting this taxonomy to activities implemented by Track II and Track III actors. The aim is to identify the type of reconciliation acts and activities that are most appropriate and efficient for the post-war BiH. The previously discussed dichotomy between future- and past-oriented activities reflects how these actors respectively prefer activities based on the external, or practical, and internal, or psychological, components from Nets-Zehngut taxonomy. Other activities were also mentioned with positive or mixed results.

The first important reconciliation strategy in BiH is **peace education**, which Jäger (2014) discussed as an effective strategy to train civil society actors and educators in peace values and to transmit them. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, peace education targets educators and civil society actors, in addition to children, youth, and religious leaders. Often these projects take the form of trainings or seminars, or when the projects target children, trainings are held in the form of more interactive workshops or roleplaying to address peace in a more dynamic way.

Interestingly, only Bosniak CSO employees working in and originally from Sarajevo spoke exclusively positively about peace education, whilst other interviewees had negative or more nuanced views on the topic. The proponents of peace education did specify the need for these activities to be adapted to local needs and participants, rather than copying those from other post-conflict areas. Interviewees did mention they were inspired by projects held in Rwanda, Kosovo, Serbia, and Northern Ireland.

Other interviewees were either very negative on the subject or agreed on the importance of these projects but insisted more on other types of activities. For instance, an international interviewee mentioned that peace education trainings were held too sporadically with little follow-up. They even stated that, “at this point, I actually think that all of these different projects are doing harm because they create the illusion that something is changing, when it's not (Interview P13, 07/03/2024, Sarajevo).” CSO employees in rural areas far from Sarajevo often pointed out that these activities were too philosophical for the local population, who did not feel concerned, or just perceived them as overdone or useless.

These direct peace education workshops, trainings, and seminar focus on the internal component of Nets-Zehngut’s (2007) analysis, which is to say the psychological state of the

involved parties, through planned activities. From the research, it shows that these types of activities may have some value to address sensitive issues and raise awareness but are mostly used by Sarajevo-based professional NGOs.

Instead, many interviewees mentioned the importance of **activity-based reconciliation projects** which indirectly led to reconciliation by focusing on other activities and shared interests to foster reconciliation, without mentioning terms such as "reconciliation" or "peace".

Interviewees mentioned different sectors of interest, such as sports (especially football and volleyball), art, music, sustainable rural tourism, demining, environmental protection, gardening, or even other social issues such as sexual reproductive rights. Actually, both in rural and urban centres, results showed it was possible to rally communities around a common cause, such as saving a park from destruction, or a mountain from lithium mining, showcasing the reproducibility of the strategy throughout BiH. A rural CSO interviewee said, "For example, we take away illegal garbage dumps, we clean nature, we clean the settlements and show the people the functionality of our organisation, and the contribution we are for them. So that's how people approach us, become part of our NGO, part of our activities and this is how our network spreads (Interview P4, 12/03/2024)." It was easier for communities to grasp the benefit of the project because they could see tangible results, instead of a potential psychological transformation within oneself.

When classifying this type of project in Nets-Zehngut's taxonomy, several observations can be made. Although these activities do impact the psychological aspect of the participants, they are firstly directed towards the external and tangible component, such as rebuilding infrastructure or protecting the material world. The reconstruction is not necessarily linked to the material destruction of the war in BiH, which is an interesting observation because the war does not need to be connected to a project for it to be a successful reconciliation project.

These activity-based projects do not necessarily need to be planned. For instance, the protection of a natural site or neighbourhood park resulted in the spontaneous mobilisation of communities and neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, this mobilisation does need to be followed up by planned activities, such as protests, petitions, or cleaning actions to gain traction in the community and achieve its goal.

However, despite the attraction of this community and activity-based reconciliation, a few interviewees noticed that these projects still remained one-time events, and rarely amounted structural change within the community. Many interviewees mentioned that reconciliation in BiH lacked a long-term vision and strategy. Therefore, activities focusing on

the external component appear to be a popular strategy for reconciliation, but not necessarily the most efficient because of its short lifespan.

Nevertheless, activity-based reconciliation has been able to engage citizens in the long-term in specific cases in rural areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This particularity requires a deeper study and analysis of **rural or local reconciliation** in BiH because it has shown original grounds for alternative positive reconciliation strategies.

Projects contributing to reconciliation in rural areas usually find their roots in some form of capacity building of small communities by encouraging them to connect and cooperate, strengthening their own resources and development. As with activity-based reconciliation, the population is more receptive because they are confronted with tangible results ensuing from capacity building programs.

Why the rural aspect needs to be mentioned is because the social cohesion in these smaller villages differs from that in Sarajevo and other urban areas, where the population may be more transient and less anchored. As one interviewee from a rural area put it: “He [rural CSO staff] said that they're very specific because they work in the field, and most of the projects are designed in Sarajevo so they don't take into account the needs of the field on the local level.”

Furthermore, in rural areas, not only can people not avoid each other, but they also have their own local experience of the war, and subsequent problems, which do not necessarily coincide with the experience and needs felt in Sarajevo, or those on a national level. All participants who had worked in rural areas stressed the need to adapt reconciliation strategies not just to BiH, but to specific villages, taking a step further than the peace education trainings which were usually focused on adapting to BiH.

All interviewees who had worked in rural areas also stressed the importance of targeting small villages along the entity line, where fighting was often the most intense and the population composition changed with returnees, thus, offering a good opportunity to create cross-border cooperation, bridging both the ethnic and entity gap.

As such, to classify this approach in the taxonomy, rural reconciliation projects revolve around external component-based activities, either planned or unplanned, but they have managed to survive longer because of the stronger social cohesion, reliance on the community, and the more imminent need for rural areas to reconcile if they want to be self-reliant. The success of rural reconciliation projects lies in the recognition that reconciliation needs to be

adapted to the specific local context, and in the case of rural Bosnia and Herzegovina this specificity is intensified because of the territorial and administrative divisions in the country, as well as the very low connectivity between cities, towns, and villages. However, if CSOs recognize the specificity of the rural areas, it might become more difficult afterwards to connect them with other areas or cities.

Overall, the most important strategy for reconciliation, whether the term "reconciliation" was mentioned or not, according to all participants, was to **foster interaction and dialogue** between people of BiH who have been closed-off from each other, to rebuild solidarity.

CSO employees in urban centres mentioned dialogue as a means for those who have gone unheard to express their suffering and move on from it, or in the setting of sharing circles to discuss similarities and differences. Another method mentioned was that of living libraries, where members of another ethnic community can share their culture and answer to prejudices or questions others have about that community. Additionally, an international interviewee urged that to truly create a dialogue, CSOs needed to personally address participants, to follow-up with them, and create a community or network of "reconciliation allies".

In rural areas, interviewees spoke more of interaction, activities where people from different ethnicities and entities were forced to see and speak to each other, but also to discuss different perspectives of the same war events. Several interviewees mentioned that interaction between ethnic groups had dwindled more in rural areas, because of the segregation created by the political and educational system. But one interviewee from rural BiH claimed that separation between ethnic groups was encouraged by foreign military in the immediate aftermath of the war to avoid a resurgence of violence.

Bosnian interviewees stressed that this dialogue and interaction, particularly with international interlocutors, had to feel like a two-way interaction, where both sides are being honest, try to impart some sort of wisdom, but are also open to learn, otherwise it would appear patronising to the local population. Study exchanges are good examples of this type of interaction.

Foreigners can also have a role in connecting people from BiH with one another by acting as a neutral mediator or a missing link. This particular aspect of dialogue is further discussed below when the role of international CSOs in cooperating with domestic CSOs is addressed.

Overall, the taxonomy of Nets-Zehngut can be adapted to the situation of BiH and civil society actors, with a few tweaks, but a pattern can be observed. Urban NGOs have a predilection for planned activities which target the psychological aspect of reconciliation. Such activities are classified as acting on the internal component. Examples of such activities are living libraries, sharing circles, or peace education workshops. However, unplanned activities targeting the external component can also bear fruit, but they are simply less visible and often have a short lifespan.

Rural areas, on the other hand, are not as receptive to activities focusing on the internal component, but prefer addressing the external component, which will indirectly foster dialogue and reconciliation. These types of activities can imply, for example, buying new, but shared equipment for segregated schools, or cleaning a natural site together, or even clusters of villages merging their resources. If there is a form of tangible activity and results, without being explicitly linked to reconciliation, the activity is likely to garner more positive reconciliation.

b. The Outreach Problem: How to Engage People in the Reconciliation Process

Many interviewees mentioned outreach of their aims and projects as a challenge, which, however, was not stressed in the discussed literature on civil society cooperation in BiH as a particularly important obstacle. Therefore, the following section strives to share the challenges interviewees face, how they perceive the cause of the challenge, and what they suggested could resolve the outreach challenges in BiH. As a result, this section is exclusively based on the subjective experience and expertise of the interviewees with little reference to preexisting literature, specifically because it represents a gap in the literature.

First, many interviewees noticed that the younger, post-war, generation was often hard to reach because they did not feel concerned by reconciliation since they had not fought in any war. CSO employees who had worked with youngsters more often also noted that social anxiety, shyness, lack of motivation, or other priorities and worries led this younger generation to not attend activities or trainings. Thus, priorities of the younger generation focused more on their individual material and mental well-being, rather than a desire for societal reconciliation.

Similarly, the older generation was also a cause for limited outreach as an interviewee stated that this generation was no longer interested in reconciliation projects, mainly because they no longer have the willingness or the energy to change the status quo. International interviewees highlighted the danger for reconciliation if the older generation was not involved

because “instead, you’ll have kids who have grown up only hearing about hate, only hearing that they're a victim of genocide, only hearing genocide did not happen, and they won't have ever lived in a society that functioned; that’s what worries me the most, in 20 years, this is going to be an even worse situation because this generation will be gone (Interview P13, 07/03/2024, Sarajevo).”

Another category of people who were difficult to reach are communities and CSOs in rural areas, particularly in Republika Srpska, because of the narrowing civic space. More will be said about the state and its impact on reconciliation below.

Finally, many noticed that when working in urban areas, particularly in Sarajevo, the participants of reconciliation projects were often the same people. It seems that reaching people who are not as interested or even against reconciliation is still a significant hurdle that needs to be overcome if reconciliation projects want to have a larger impact on society.

Several interviewees mentioned certain categories of people who can improve the outreach and impact of reconciliation projects, but also negatively affect them. The first is that of academia, who can or cannot be considered as part of the arena of civil society, depending on the definition as argued above. Few interviewees mentioned the role of academia, but those who did, complained how they were too silent and should use the platform they have to speak more about reconciliation. One of these civil society interviewees, being an academic themself, also noted how academia was sometimes stuck in its ivory tower and lost a certain touch with the reality of the situation and the status of reconciliation.

The second category is that of war veterans, who have garnered much admiration and respect in their local communities for their acts during the war. As such, they are held in high esteem and considered influential in the community. Their role in certain local communities has already proven to be positive when they engage with one another, speaking openly about the past, and accepting each other’s different perspectives on the war. For instance, a documentary, “Maglaj, War and Peace”, follows three old friends who had fought on different sides of the war, recounting their war-time experience (OSCE 2021). The Centre for Nonviolent Action also organised public forums for veterans so they could answer questions about their motivations and experiences (Fischer 2006, 388). Nevertheless, these war veterans can also be a source of antagonization in other communities when they reproduce a discourse of victimisation or the narrative of the ethnonationalist political elite. Their influence can then disserve reconciliation.

The third category of potential actors to improve outreach can also be criticised, and this is the category of more generally influential community leaders. These leaders may be of a religious nature, but also be the leaders of sport clubs, football fan groups, village teachers, or founders of any sort of local association. These are the types of people that interviewees from rural areas identify, and those that could be deduced from their statements on who was active and influential in the community. Again, the importance of community leaders' role should be nuanced since they can easily spread messages of hatred instead of reconciliation.

In response to these challenges, interviewees suggested several ways to cope with this lack of interest or lack of outreach as civil society actors without necessarily relying on volatile influential community leaders or academics. For instance, interviewees from Sarajevo started using online seminars for those who were shy or less interested, to still be able to attend without having to risk much. This also allows people from rural areas or areas where the civic space is narrower, such as Republika Srpska, to attend and meet people from all over the country.

International CSOs can also play a key role by helping local CSOs to reach out to the diaspora who are present usually only in the summer to visit family. An interviewee from a rural area mentioned that the diaspora often did not feel directly concerned by the reconciliation and other community projects, by engaging more with them on the topic of reconciliation even when they are not in BiH, they can become a new source of resources for rural areas, for instance by supporting communities online throughout the year of even moving back to BiH.

Some interviewees mentioned that framing a project as "reconciliation" would not appeal to communities because of the overuse of the term and it having lost all meaning for some, so two international interviewees suggested a new term and framework to address reconciliation: trust building. Using different terms could attract more people according to these interviewees. This term was praised because it sounds more accessible, open towards the future, does not carry the heavy connotation of reconciliation, and allows to build personal relations which may someday lead to discussing more sensitive matters such as the war or ethnicity.

Overall, there are a few suggestions to overcome the lack of outreach of reconciliation projects, but they require significant human and material resources, and assistance of larger domestic or international CSOs.

c. *Disempowerment of Civil Society in Favour of State Actors*

The following findings on the responsibility of civil society are based on the themes which emerged from the interviewees to shed light on their perceived hurdles and identify potential solutions without relying too much on the existing literature. This section attempts to understand and nuance the perception of actors in BiH and is again largely based on their subjective experience.

Many interviewees agreed that civil society had a role to play in reconciliation, but that their effort would not amount to any lasting and generalised positive results because of larger systemic hurdles and counterproductive actors. This type of argument disempowers civil society and pushes responsibility on state actors, which may be correct in a way because the state has a role to play, but simultaneously reflects a lack of willingness within civil society to continue to be an actor for change. The three most often mentioned hurdles to civil society's efforts were: the need for a homogenous regional action; the Bosnian and Herzegovinian education system; and the political regime in BiH.

For all three hurdles, mostly national politicians, but also the international community, are perceived to be the responsible actors for the continued obstacles, and the lack of reconciliation at a larger scale. As was briefly mentioned earlier, these state and international actors were criticised for how they handled peace building and reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, mainly because of their overly reliance on top-down strategies (Avi-Guy 2021; Kostovicova and Bojicic-Dzelilovic 2015, 188). Within the international community, particularly the United Nations, the OSCE, and several Western countries were criticised both in the literature and the interviewees. Thus, mostly intergovernmental organisations or foreign governments are the target of this criticism. Nevertheless, this has also negatively affected the reputation of all other international CSOs.

The first hurdle to overcome is the need for a common multilateral approach to reconciliation at a regional, Western Balkan level. One of the Bosnian Croat interviewees rightly mentioned how reconciliation efforts at the local level will continuously be contradicted by the irredentism of some of BiH's neighbouring countries, especially Serbia and Croatia. Furthermore, because conflicts and diplomatic relations have become deeply interdependent and intertwined in the region, it is difficult to improve diplomatic relations with one neighbour without risking angering another.

The regional hurdle has become even more difficult since some of the Western Balkan states became members of the European Union, according to one interviewee working in a

regional international organisation, because the new EU states are no longer, or less, included in negotiation and cooperation processes. This mainly concerns Croatia, which still has vested interests in BiH because of the large number of Croats in the country.

Interviewees with a rural, urban, and international background all agreed that reconciliation projects on a regional level have been particularly successful because it allowed participants to discover similarities with people from different countries, not simply different ethnicities.

The second hurdle to overcome is the educational system. At the moment, schools and education in BiH are segregated, because each ethnic community is entitled to be taught their national subjects, such as their own language, as well as own religious education, even in public schools.

Both international and Bosnian interviewees blamed the international community for not having involved themselves more in the drafting of the curriculum, to not have been a keeper of its multi-perspectivity. Instead, in some cantons the OSCE encouraged the use of the two-schools-under-one-roof principle, as a temporary solution because of the lack of infrastructure, or simply monoethnic schools. These types of schools quickly anchored themselves permanently in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian education structure.

A Bosnian interviewee mentioned how this segregated approach has already been internalised by the post-war generation, who rarely question the education structure. Besides this more passive approach, parents in some areas are staunchly against their children being in the same classroom as children of another ethnic group for any subject.

Therefore, civil society may attempt to organise informal education through multiethnic workshops or new textbooks with a multi-perspective approach to culture and history, but the effects are unlikely to reach far and wide if the formal education system remains divided.

The final, most named, and perhaps most difficult, hurdle to reconciliation, is the current political regime in BiH which was established after the war, described earlier. International and Bosnian interviewees mentioned it was much harder to cooperate in Republika Srpska where civic space continues to shrink. Similarly, the cantonal separation within the Federation does not invite communities and organisations to work together as legislation can differ. Overall, the structure of the state is deemed by interviewees to be overcomplicated by the many administrative levels, which makes the state difficult to understand for citizens, who become uninterested.

Additionally, politicians at the local, national, and regional level are accused of further dividing the country, and not supporting the peace and reconciliation agreements some of them

sign. Corruption was mentioned by nearly all interviewees as the root cause of the divisiveness pushed by politicians because they benefit economically and politically from the status quo. Contradicting policy directives issues in Sarajevo and Banja Luka also make it more difficult for rural cooperation between entities as one interviewee from a rural area mentioned. An international interviewee even stated that people were afraid to reconcile because of the threat of the use of force and violence by parties in power.

Furthermore, reconciliation is also perceived as a responsibility of society and the state, rather than an individual one, by both international and Bosnian interviewees. Because of the personal experience people have lived during the war, it would be unfair to force them to reconcile, particularly when victims and perpetrators of certain acts are still living in each other's vicinity. This echoes the challenges named by Pankhurst (1999) and Auerbach (2005) about forgiveness.

Instead, reconciliation should focus on the state level, how politicians from different ethnonationalist parties cooperate for a shared future and stop promoting hateful messages towards each other. As one international interviewee mentioned, "[…] when you come to this country, you will easily realise that the politics require reconciliation, not the people." Indeed, a Bosnian interviewee agreed that there are so many similarities between ethnic communities in BiH, but also between the people in the Western Balkans in general; the divisiveness seems purely an artificial construct created by the politicians. The international community has also played a role in legitimising the actions of ethnonationalist politicians by not addressing the pressure exerted on weaker parties, and conceding to ethnonationalist demands according to an international interviewee.

Ultimately, interviewees from all backgrounds admitted that civil society reconciliation projects are hopeful and optimistic initiatives but will not amount to deeper structural change because the system is set against them. Not only are these projects only targeting a small number of individuals at the time, but they also teach values and practices which seem to exist in a vacuum, not in the reality which is a territorially separated country with ethnonationalist parties who still promote an unreconciliatory message.

To improve the political regime, one interviewee mentioned that they would support a new regime that could mix certain elements of the previous Yugoslav state, such as no private property, obligatory representatives of a different ethnic group, intensified ethnic mixing, and technocracy.

One of the interviewees also mentioned that civil society could still play a role in overcoming this hurdle by pressuring the government or parliament through petitions and protests. However, these protests have often also "failed", because did not wield the desired results, or they quickly dissipated as shown by the 2014 protests.

An interesting approach mentioned by an interviewee who had witnessed reconciliation efforts in both rural and urban areas, was to encourage the state to create homogenous memorialisation guidelines. Currently, there are no existing guidelines, which often leads to memorialisation of tragic events where one ethnic community in particular suffered, promoting a victimisation narrative, and implicitly or explicitly blaming another ethnic group for their suffering. Shared joyous events are rarely or not celebrated, although they could form the basis of remembering a common history and heritage to build a shared future upon.

International interviewees did notice how civil society often blamed the international community and Bosnian and Herzegovinian politicians for the challenges to reconciliation, but how civil society rarely self-reflected on its role in the reconciliation process. One interviewee wondered why civil society did not try more to draft policy proposals and pressure parliament to discuss and adopt them, especially in the last decennia with the diminishing international presence, and after the anti-government protests of 2014 which amounted to limited political change (Hasić and Karabegović 2018).

In conclusion, there are several hurdles to reconciliation, but civil society seems to have disempowered itself from its bottom-up reconciliatory role by pushing the larger share of responsibility onto state actors. Perhaps, reconciliatory civil society in BiH could focus more on advocacy.

B. Cooperation Obstacles and Improvements between Domestic, urban and rural, and International CSOs

All interviewees acquiesced that there was room for improvement in terms of CSO cooperation, but some were more negative than others on the status quo of cooperative efforts today. The main issues hindering cooperation seemed to stem from the bureaucratic and inflexible organigram of international, and even urban, CSOs to properly cooperate with smaller rural CSOs. An overall lack of trust between all parties was also mentioned as a major

problem. Besides the behaviour of CSOs, the state and territorial organisation of BiH was the cause of several problems.

In terms of how CSOs cooperate, the traditional roles of the international players as donors discussed in the theoretical section were mentioned by nearly all interviewees, but they can be much more than that in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

1. The Current Challenges to Cooperation in BiH

a. Inflexible and Bureaucratic Partners

The most discussed aspect of cooperation between domestic and international CSOs was the additional bureaucracy from the side of the international partner. Other than this being a time-consuming procedure, the bureaucracy and procedures negatively affect civil society development as a whole, and therefore the reconciliation process and the desire of certain domestic CSOs to continue cooperating with international ones. These problems reflect the critique of Fagan (2005), Mastrorocco (2020), and Puljek-Shank and Verkoren (2017), who argued how international actors negatively affected civil society in BiH, mostly through their role as a financial partner.

To obtain material or financial support, there is a degree of conditionality, but Bosnian and international interviewees complained that this resulted in many organisations changing their mission and projects, losing sight of their initial goal, to appeal to donors and survive. Simultaneously, projects and domestic CSOs lose touch with the needs of the local communities as they focus more on the interests of foreign partners becoming more a creative enterprise of an international actor rather than a local one. This in turn affects local agency and emancipation of domestic CSOs who become reliant on international intervention, not only to fund projects, but fully create them. Civil society is then no longer community or constituency based, but donor based. A Bosnian employee in an international organisation summarised the problem as follows, “because in this moment, in such a bureaucratic system and all of that what they are asking for in open calls, we are not giving a chance to grassroot movements to develop (Interview P3, 05/04/2024, Sarajevo).” And because grants and partners are limited, this creates a competitive environment between domestic CSOs who will first look to align themselves with the interests and procedures established by the international partners, rather than focus on fulfilling local needs.

Furthermore, those working in international CSOs also complained about bureaucracy of their own CSO at an organisational level. For instance, there is a lack of communication between head and field office, leading to a discrepancy between their objectives and those in head offices are considered to be in an ivory tower by their colleagues. Nevertheless, field offices are also required to follow the political line issued by the head office which slows their response to a local crisis and hinders their flexibility because they need to consider a diplomatic minefield.

Overall, it appears that both domestic and international CSO employees experience negative consequences from the bureaucracy of international CSOs. Interestingly, all participants referred to large international CSOs, or even international intergovernmental organisations, not smaller foreign CSOs. Nevertheless, the incentive for Bosnian CSOs to cooperate with international ones is currently low because of these, perceived, negative consequences.

b. Overall Lack of Trust

Whilst interviewing actors from an international and Bosnian background, it became apparent that there was a certain lack of trust between them, or between international CSOs and the local communities where they attempted to establish projects. Bosnian CSO personnel in rural areas expressed explicit distrust towards foreigners implementing projects in their communities. The term "foreigner" often referred to non-Bosnian, but for some also to anyone outside of the community. One of the interviewees explained how foreign CSOs, embassies, and companies, all form a threat to their community. Thus, there is no distinction between the type of foreign activity or persona, all are considered the "enemy". One interviewee clearly stated, "We don't trust international organisations", whilst others expressed this in a more nuanced manner. Internationals also expressed how certain communities would immediately reject any proposition for a joint project and how they felt they were perceived as enemies, particularly where the political elite was made up of Croat or Serb nationalists.

Bosnian interviewees frequently complained that international actors did not know or understand BiH, because they did not sufficiently consult locals when designing projects and simply use projects implemented in other post-conflict regions in the context of BiH. Thus, Bosnian activists perceive them as lazy or their approach ill-adapted. International interviewees recognised this fault on their part on lacking understanding and consultation of locals.

One international interviewee mentioned how many colleagues came to the region for a limited time, usually for career advancement reasons, and then left to pursue other opportunities. However, once this staff member leaves, their projects rarely survive, and the sociopolitical situation deteriorates. Not only is it difficult for the successor to rebuild the lost progress, but this also creates a negative image of international actors as unreliable support.

However, Bosnian CSO staff is not always trusted by international actors because they are inherently biased about the situation in their country. An international interviewee considered this was a natural consequence of being part of one's own country's civil society, but that this should encourage cooperation with internationals who can bring a more neutral point of view to the project.

As such, both internationals and Bosnians are wary of each other, and each perceives themselves as being more aware of what the actual needs of a community are. This is an overgeneralisation, as all interviewees mentioned that they knew Bosnian and international CS activists who were very in tune with local needs and their partners, but this lack of trust was still mentioned frequently, particularly in rural areas.

c. An Uncooperative Territorial Organisation of the State

As was mentioned above, many problems stem from the state and its territorial organisation, and this affects the possibility for CSOs to cooperate as well. The cantonal separation was mentioned as a first hindrance, mainly because it again creates an environment unfavourable to cooperation with other CSOs located outside the canton. The legislation on CSO registration makes it so that every canton has a separate register, so it becomes more difficult to find out about similar organisations in other cantons. Nevertheless, although this obstacle is not unsurmountable, it does encourage organisations to stick to their comfort zones and focus only on their own community.

Furthermore, the entity separation, besides yet again creating a separate registry for CSOs, has led to a great discrepancy between legislation for CSOs on either side. Several Bosnian and international interviewees mentioned how the civic space in Republika Srpska has become dangerously narrow, particularly in recent years with Milorad Dodik creating a hostile political climate, and how they are discouraged from cooperating with the organisations outside of Republika Srpska. Although the Government of the RS ultimately withdrew in May 2024 the proposed bill on increased surveillance of NGOs funded from abroad who may influence the

public opinion, this type of legislation reflects the narrowing civic space in the RS (Kvinna 2024).

Additionally, Sarajevo is the financial, political, cultural, and social centre of BiH. Many interviewees complained that all resources stem from Sarajevo, but are also only used in Sarajevo, and perhaps a few other large cities such as Banja Luka, Tuzla, and Mostar. The state seems to not have invested sufficiently in rural areas, to develop their potential, and attract international CSOs.

In short, BiH's territorial organisation has limited cooperation to those in urban centres or located in the same canton, because it is administratively complicated, or even politically discouraged, to cooperate with other cantons and regions.

2. Successful Practices and Suggested Improvements for CSO Cooperation in BiH

Although many interviewees complained about misunderstandings, miscommunications, and other obstacles to cooperation between Bosnian and/or international CSOs, several themes also emerged from their statements on how to improve this cooperation. Some interviewees had very specific examples of a time that cooperation went well, other started observing a trend, a type of approach to more successful cooperation, and these are outlined below.

a. Improving Trust: Better Communication, Transparency, and Coordination between International, Urban, and Rural Actors

As interviewees mentioned, international CSOs are often bureaucratically complex, and different organisations do not trust each other. The obvious, but practically difficult, way to improve cooperation on this aspect, is improving overall communication, transparency, and coordination of actions from both the international and the Bosnian side, in urban and rural areas. Criticism is often directed towards the international CSOs, but Bosnian CSOs have their share of defaults, although seem to lack a certain degree of self-reflexion and have been negatively influenced by the narrow civic space, as argued by (Seixas 2013, 76).

International and Bosnian interviewees shared that their positive cooperations started as a conversation with their homologues on equal footing, without one side trying to "teach" the other how things should be done or being patronising. A Bosnian interview mentioned, "and

when I'm thinking about that, how it happened actually when it works, it was that I also had from them, you know, from foreigners, something which they were bringing to me, but not in the sense "you must do that", but when they ask me "what do you need" and then we shape it, you know, that's logically the best (P5 2024)." So, they needed to feel like their international homologue was truly listening to them and open to learn from them, and vice versa, and that a mutual exchange could exist between them rather than a one-sided lecture.

Both international and Bosnian interviewees agree that international CSOs should listen more to local needs, and more importantly to local expertise, because they know what strategy might work in their community. Therefore, it is important that local communities are involved in the project from the start. Another interviewee from Sarajevo specifically mentioned the need for debate between the CSO staff, in order to foster compromise, and show support attending each other's events, further learning from each other. At the same time, this form of support explains why many interviewees mentioned that the same people kept coming to the events and there seemed to be few new people interested.

Those who worked in rural areas often mentioned anecdotes of their projects starting with personal relations established overtime, before developing a more professional cooperation. Only once family members were met, dinners or coffees had been shared, and regular interaction was developed, did the mention of a possible joint project come up. Even in further cooperation, informal relations were preferred to slowly build up trust. Some CSOs have even explicitly told interviewees that they were willing to cooperate with them as an activist, but not in their capacity as NGO representative, reflecting the negative reputation of NGOs in BiH. Although the lack of formality may sound like jeopardising any form of long-term commitment, so far, the projects mentioned by interviewees who used this informal and personal approach are still active and thriving.

However, improving trust and cooperation also requires better transparency on both sides, Bosnian and international. For instance, many interviewees mentioned that both sides should work on stating their objectives more clearly so they can get together behind these similar interests and resolve their differences in favour of the greater cause. Although having a clear objective seems evident for an organisation, this recommendation was mentioned by many interviewees, hinting that many mission statements are too symbolic, or too broad to explain clearly what the organisation is aiming for. This also hints back to the criticism of the NGO sector, where many organisations seem to routinely change their mission statement to fit into the guidelines of a grant or project of an international CSO or donor.

Interviewees also complained about the rampant corruption in the political and civil society arena, capturing the international funds that were meant for CSOs. Both Bosnian and international interviewees complain that so many funds have been invested into BiH's civil society sector, and not only are the funds being invested with little return of investment, but to Bosnian and Herzegovinian interviewees it appears that the grants only serve to finance the salaries of NGO employees and their benefits, not projects for the local communities. Thus, on the one hand, international donors should make a better attempt of verifying how they are allocating funds, but on the other hand, as an international interviewee remarked, there should be some self-reflection on the Bosnian side. Although the "corrupt CSOs" have been receiving most of the funds, many CSOs that evidently do not consider themselves corrupt have also received funds but may have made some mistakes in how they have used financial assistance from international partners.

Again, the lack of trust seems quite striking on both sides with blame being assigned to everyone from politicians, to corrupt CSOs, and the international community, but responsibility ultimately falls on everyone involved. Bosnian interviewees, however, usually only blamed other organisations, and not their own way of working. This is a logical reaction, but additional self-reflexion is necessary if the situation and conditions of transparency are to evolve.

The final step to better communication is coordination of civil society actions, despite the competitive environment between CSOs in the capital. Internationals and Bosnians complained that the international community had been implementing different strategies which were not only confusing for citizens and partner organisations, but also not adapted to local needs. Interviewees considered the root of the problem to be that international actors did not consult each other, or the local populations before implementing a project, but due to the multitude of project, interviewees admitted they often did not know about similar projects, which would have been a terrific opportunity to cooperate, but instead divided resources and created more confusion.

Another issue reported by both international and BiH interviewees was the lack of long-term vision in projects leading to contradictory objectives. On the international side, this was first mostly caused by the need to react quickly and find temporary solutions to urgent problems such as lack of infrastructure and security after the war. However, these temporary solutions, such as divided education, have cemented themselves. Similarly, many grants and open calls for projects focus on projects for up to one year or less, but as mentioned before, lasting social change, specifically reconciliation, requires years. Finally, an international interviewee also

remarked that many self-starting CSOs and impactful social movements assemble around a point-cause, without drawing a more long-term vision out of this cause or trying to network with organisations in other areas with similar objectives.

The first recommendation an international interviewee remarked would be the need for these international actors and CSOs to tap more into their own networks, which they have failed to do so far. All interviewees agreed that if the international CSOs could synchronise their projects better, this could amount to greater change in Bosnia and Herzegovina. An attempt which was mentioned by several interviewees, is the current forming of a "Quartet", the OSCE, EU, IOM, and UNDP are bundling their efforts to stop organising overlapping projects and synchronise their actions. The synchronisation should not be limited to the international level, but also include local organisations or administration to be accepted and understood by the communities.

The second recommendation interviewees had for better synchronisation was focusing on common, even outside BiH, long-term objectives, to identify partners with similar goals. Particularly interviewees from rural areas acquiesced that cooperation had improved when common long-term goals were found, such as environmental protection, to join forces with organisations in the area, and even open possibilities for cooperation abroad. Other Bosnian interviewees reiterated that they would like to see a clear long-term vision from the international side, on a timespan of five or even fifteen years.

Furthermore, all interviewees complained about the Sarajevo-centric vision of civil society and the resource allocation, creating a vacuum in rural areas, and a competition in the capital. This creates a form of elite civil society in Sarajevo, despite projects of smaller CSOs in rural areas achieving better results because they are focused on the local and the trust of their constituency, stated an interviewee working in Sarajevo but originally from a rural area.

However, civil society can tackle this problem on its own initiative and does not need to wait for donors to start allocating more to rural areas, because larger, urban CSOs can themselves allocate funds to rural CSOs. Not only do these urban Bosnian CSOs understand the rural areas better than their international counterparts and donors, but this allows for intra-Bosnian cooperation, and a possibility to spread results of a positive rural project to a larger audience or to reproduce it somewhere else in the country. Both urban and a rural CSO interviewees mentioned they had worked with the other in this capacity and were very satisfied of this type of cooperation.

Also, another urban CSO employee mentioned urban NGOs can partner by sharing a grant for a common project. Although one organisation takes the lead, a joint project still entails greater human capital and outreach. From urban NGOs, this requires communication efforts and abandoning the competitive mindset.

In conclusion, many interviewees criticised the attitude of the international actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, specifically because of projects and legislation they supported right after the war. However, some interviewees also pointed out the need for Bosnian CSOs to reflect on their behaviour if they truly hope to improve trust through communication, transparency, and coordination. The responsibility lies both with international and domestic CSO, and they are both capable of being actors for change, despite the rampant corruption at the state and institutional levels.

b. Capacity-Building instead of "Charity-Building"

Many interviewees saw international players merely in their capacity to initiate projects themselves or as a financial partner, a donor, as was noted by Fagan (2005), Mastrorocco (2020), and Puljek-Shank and Verkoren (2017). However, Bosnian interviewees criticise this approach, and urge international CSOs to act more in a way of capacity-building, providing material or human assistance, rather than or not limited to financial assistance. This is more in line with Bock and Anderson's (1999) suggestion that third-party assistance is most effective when done through material investment into long-term institutions. Still, the requests for international assistance and partnerships from local CSOs extend further than Bock and Anderson's suggestion.

Bosnian CSO actors complained that the international community as a whole allocated many resources to the country, without investing these in human capital, organisational development, and fostering local agency. International interviewees agreed that many international actors had replaced Bosnian civil society instead of assisting them. Both Bosnian and international interviewees agreed that international actors had intervened too much, leading to reluctance on the Bosnian side to cooperate with them. The attitude of internationals was often described as "patronising" towards Bosnian CSOs.

Furthermore, the constant intervention of international actors has complicated cooperation. An international interviewee pointed out that the international community has taken away all

need for accountability from political actors, because internationals had taken it upon themselves to make the tough decisions, implement the most vital projects, whilst local politicians were able to continue to spread an ethnonationalist propaganda. Also, politicians communicate directly with international CSOs, which leaves no place for Bosnian CSOs in the discussion according to a Bosnian interviewee. Overall, Bosnian CSOs were also not a regular interlocutor for international actors after the war, and this has justified their continued ignorance by state actors.

Nevertheless, international financial partners were also described positively by Bosnian interviewees as long as the projects and decision-making process remain in the hands of the locals. Bosnian activists who integrated international CSOs felt they could foster deeper change working in an international organisation whilst still responding to local needs.

The role more CSO actors would like to see the international CSOs take on is that of capacity-building partners who provide material and human assistance. This reflects the pragmatic needs of rural communities. International, rural, and urban interviewees suggested similar ways of how international CSOs had been a positive partner, mainly through training, whether the topic is financial advice, organisation, methodologies to achieve their objective, or improving communication. These trainings allow CSO actors to better their organisation, their impact, and transmit these teachings.

International CSOs often have more resources than Bosnian ones, so they dispose of offices and material which are difficult to access for Bosnian CSOs who are grassroot, self-starting or rely on grants. A way to support these CSOs is by offering them space to work, basic bureaucratic material, so they can have a place to come together, conduct their projects, or send out their work. Larger Bosnian CSOs can also fulfil these roles in terms of capacity-building.

Another way international actors are useful is through mediation, outreach, and advocacy, as a pressure point on other CSOs or state authorities. In a way, international CSOs become the missing link between CSOs and the rest of the potential network they can reach or cooperate with.

As mediators, international CSOs are able to create a platform for dialogue between authorities and CSOs at different state levels. Also, Bosnians within international CSOs are operate as such. A Bosnian interviewee working in an international setting said, “it’s very complicated in terms of that I also am researching that and trying because I'm just one year here and I still didn't learn totally what they actually want.” They continued, “I only see that

now in the individuals who were in actually on both sides [Bosnian and international] and we are actually trying to translate the language of the locals in the project language." Thus, it is still difficult to understand fully what is expected on the international side, but the presence of Bosnian employees does facilitate communication between the local and international.

International and Bosnian interviewees who had worked in rural areas remarked the potential of international CSOs to assist local organisations in their networking and improve their outreach, by inviting influential persona, and drawing attention of the Bosnian diaspora or a foreign audience. A Bosnian interviewee from an international organisation also suggested international organisations to encourage Bosnian CSOs to find partners in the region, like in Kosovo or Serbia, or even further away,

Through advocacy, international actors can also contribute to changing the legal environment, pressure authorities to assure its implementation, and urge CSOs to cooperate, whilst local CSOs work on changing social norms and mindsets to fit this environment. International actors can condition the allocation of funds to projects which stem from a cooperative effort, or threaten to stop their funding, either to the state or CSOs, to urge a change of behaviour. The latter is a drastic measure suggested by an international interviewee, whilst Bosnian interviewees preferred that international organisations continue to fund projects in BiH, but with a different approach to stimulate cooperation. An interviewee from a rural area claims there is a need for international presence because to hold politicians and corruption in check.

In conclusion, the literature accurately described some of the main challenges of cooperation of CSOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as bureaucracy, financial dependence, mistrust, and charity-case building. However, there was still a gap regarding how cooperation could be improved. Based on international and Bosnian interviewees, cooperation in BiH can be improved mostly through better communication, transparency, and coordination, as well as international or larger Bosnian CSOs taking a new role as a capacity- and network-building agent. The issues, as well as potential improvements, of cooperation are intrinsically linked to the impact CSOs have on reconciliation, and which strategy they will undertake.

V. Conclusion

This research attempted to answer two controversial questions about BiH's civil society and post-war reconstruction. Thanks to the variety of interviewed actors, and the extensive body of literature on the subject, these questions can be answered, although with a great degree of nuance and impossibly comprehensively.

Reconciliation remains a vague term, which reflects both upon the past and future, on the individual and society. Depending on the definition one chooses, the approach to the process and outcome will be more or less pragmatic or philosophical. Interviewees from Bosnia and Herzegovina working in urban centres and professional NGOs were more likely to choose an approach based on discussing the past, the trauma, healing, and rebuilding interpersonal relations through activities based on this internal component. Interviewees from a rural area most often disagreed and preferred a pragmatic approach, centred on tangible results without even needing the mention of reconciliation, but simply an activity based on the external component which would bring people together. Interestingly, the former were mostly Bosniak women, whilst the latter were mostly men, but from all ethnic backgrounds. International interviewees had a more nuanced approach, often having some preference for the pragmatic approach but insisting on the need for a philosophical approach to complement it.

The variety of reconciliation definitions and civil society strategies in BiH offered a great opportunity to adapt Nets-Zehngut's taxonomy to civil society activities. If a judgment had to be made, this analysis favour reconciliation projects based on the external component, whether planned or unplanned, because results were easier to measure because often tangible, and participants do not feel confronted with the heavy symbolic and psychological aspect of reconciliation. Post-war BiH has already experienced many attempts at reconciliation, and any project explicitly mentioning peacebuilding or reconciliation will face reluctance, so it needs to be reframed as something productive and interesting for a country facing many other economic, social, and political issues. Nevertheless, both outreach and longevity were often lacking in these activities since they were based on very local and immediate needs.

Thus, civil society still needs to find a way to network itself through the country, linking these smaller activities into a larger national reconciliation movement. This is where cooperation comes into play. Although international and urban CSOs often give financial assistance to smaller rural CSOs, they could cooperate more efficiently if the assistance focused

more on capacity-building and networking between different CSO, state, and international actors. Before this can be achieved, trust between CSOs needs to be rebuild by being more transparent about goals and methods; speak informally, honestly and on equal footing; and coordinate actions. This is easier said than done, but BiH civil society should never forget to also reflect on itself and its capacities. Interviews showed there was a lack of trust towards international CSOs, but also a lack of self confidence in the ability to bring about change. If all involved want cooperation to be improved, and with respect towards local needs and expertise, domestic CSOs should also accept their responsibility in the deterioration of the relationship between domestic and international civil society, just as the international CSOs have realised that they interfered too much with insufficient local input.

As such, international intervention and CSOs are not as negative as the literature have made them out to be for BiH, as long as there is a bigger focus on capacity-building rather than charity and handouts. Rebuilding trust and open communication will allow a better mutual understanding of BiH, and more resources and approaches to achieve reconciliation.

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Interview P1, 10/02/2024, Sarajevo

Interview P2, 11/04/2024, Sarajevo

Interview P3, 05/04/2024, Sarajevo

Interview P4, 12/03/2024, Maglaj

Interview P5, 19/03/2024, Sarajevo

Interview P6, 12/03/2024, Maglaj

Interview P7, 23/02/2024, Sarajevo

Interview P8, 13/03/2024, Tuzla

Interview P9, 16/03/2024, Ilidža

Interview P10, 16/02/2024, Sarajevo

Interview P11, 26/02/2024, Sarajevo

Interview P12, 14/03/2024, Sarajevo

Interview P13, 07/03/2024, Sarajevo

Appendix

Interview questionnaire – Basic questioning line

1. Please tell me a bit about yourself and how you came to work in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in this particular organisation?
2. What is your opinion on the involvement of your work in Bosnia and Herzegovina currently, 20 years after the war?
3. Have you noticed great differences between rural areas and Sarajevo in your line of work regarding the people's needs or interests in relation to reconciliation?
4. What do you think of the term "reconciliation"? What do you think of the label "ethnic"? Do Bosnians need reconciliation?
5. How do you achieve reconciliation? Which strategies have you tried, and which is the most effective strategy according to you? What challenges have you faced in relation to your colleagues, Bosnian or international?
6. Have you worked a lot with other organisations, international or Bosnian?
7. What is your opinion on international organisations in BiH, and professional domestic NGOs?
8. How is feedback from you, partner organisations, or project participants registered by your organisation? How can international actors help domestic ones?
9. Why is there a lack of cooperation between organisations with the same goal?
10. Do you have any further comments on reconciliation, or about the way domestic and international actors cooperate?