

Bosnia's Ex-Soldiers Unite Over Shared Woes

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Former foes find common ground in protest over army pensions and unemployment.

When war broke out in Bosnia in 1992, Nermin Karacic, a Bosniak from Sarajevo, was just 19 years old. He knew nothing about war and was not even sure who the Bosnian army was fighting. Nevertheless, he was duly drafted.

Karacic was wounded twice that year, first in May, and then in December. His best friend was killed, leaving him filled with anger and frustration. By the time the war ended three years later, Karacic bore both physical and mental scars.

It was only years later that Karacic began to recover from the traumas he had experienced during the war.

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"I started facing my wartime traumas because of my children, and gradually I began forgiving my former enemies," the father-of-four said. "I didn't want my children to grow up hating anybody."

In 2002, Karacic joined the non-governmental organisation the Centre for Nonviolent Action, CAN, which operates throughout former Yugoslavia providing seminars and training workshops for war veterans from all sides, and promoting nonviolence and peace-building.

Karacic is now amongst those ex-soldiers who, having once faced each other as enemies, are now working together to tackle problems - such as a lack of pension rights and unemployment - which affect them all.

Three armies fought each other in the early Nineties - the Bosnian Serb Army, VRS, Bosnian government forces and the Bosnian Croat Defence Council, HVO. From 1991 to 1995, more than 500,000 people across former Yugoslavia served in various armed formations.

After the Dayton Peace Agreement ended the war in 1995, Bosnia's separate forces were dissolved and replaced by a joint army.

Many war veterans joined this new army as professional soldiers, but some who chose not to return to the military had difficulties finding proper employment, struggling with a perception of former soldiers as exponents of nationalistic ideologies who were ready to die for their beliefs during the war.

At a joint protest in Sarajevo held in early February, former enemies came together to demand pensions they say they are all entitled to receive.

They were responding to amendments to a law on service in the country's armed forces which were adopted in September last year, stipulating that anyone older than 35 cannot serve in the military.

Immediately after the amendments were adopted, 1,400 soldiers were laid off and told there were insufficient funds in the state budget for their pensions, leaving them both unemployed and penniless.

"Our politicians have brought us closer to each other," said Slavenko Dodik, a former HVO soldier who came to Sarajevo to join the protest. "We are in the same situation - Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks."

Sead Trako, a Bosnian government forces veteran from Sarajevo, continued his military service after the war in Bosnia's post-Dayton army until he was laid off last year.

"This problem with pensions and lay-offs united men and women from all three armies in the last war," he

said. "They demand their rights together. This is the first time something like this has happened in [Bosnia], which means nothing can unite people more than poverty and misery."

Darko Topic, a former VRS soldier from Prijedor, stood side by side with Trako and Dodik during the protest in Sarajevo.

He spent the entire war as a member of the VRS and five years in Bosnia's armed forces before he was laid off last year, like many of his colleagues.

"I have the right to a pension, just as all my colleagues do," Topic said. "We are in a very difficult position now. We have nothing to live on. We have families, children, loans, we have to send our children to school, to take them to doctors."

Topic added he had tried to find another job many times, but without success.

"Soldiers of all three armies were manipulated during the war, and we are being manipulated now," he said. "I am proud of the fact that I was in the VRS in the Nineties. I respect former soldiers from the other two sides because we all experienced the horrors of war and yet we know we have no other option but to coexist."

Although state officials responded to the joint protests by promising they would do all in their power to find the money for the soldiers' pensions, no concrete action has yet been taken.

"People often forget that although there were volunteers on all sides, many soldiers were drafted against their will and had no choice but to join their respective armies," Karacic said, whose first encounter with former VRS soldiers took place nine years ago, in a CNA meeting in the small town of Rudo in Republika Srpska, RS

"I was afraid of those people," he said. But his suspicion has now gone, and many of his former enemies are today his friends.

"We have built trust among us," Karacic continued. "I visit associations of soldiers from all three sides and no one has ever reacted to me inappropriately."

Karacic added that he often now visits the RS and is sometimes surprised by the warm reaction of VRS war veterans.

"It happened a few times that former VRS members, after hearing that I had been a [Bosnian army] soldier and a member of a special police unit in Sarajevo, shook my hand and said, 'Finally, here's someone who doesn't claim he was only a cook in the army during the war!'" he recalled

But many in Bosnian society have found it hard to build bridges with their former enemies.

"When you condemn the crimes which members of your ethnic group committed, and when you overcome the hatred towards other ethnic groups, politicians and nationalist from your own people disown you," Adnan Hasanbegovic, a CNA activist from Sarajevo, said. "But if we do not condemn these crimes, we will put a heavy burden on our children's shoulders."

This is why, he explains, that having witnessed the horrors and chaos of the war, war veterans can play a significant role in campaigning for reconciliation.

"Solidarity and empathy are prerequisites for reconciliation among ordinary people," Hasanbegovic said. "Only those who have empathy for other people's suffering can start truly forgiving. And that's what former soldiers from all three sides do."

Karacic says he understands why people sometimes have difficulties accepting the necessity of reconciliation.

"At first, I couldn't grasp that concept," he said. "How could I reconcile with my former enemies, those who were shooting at me and killed my friends? That was my initial reaction. But now I look at reconciliation from another point of view. I know I don't have to love and be friends with my former enemies, but we can be at peace with each other and not pose a threat to anyone.

"I don't have to be afraid of them, and they don't have to be afraid of me anymore. We all share this country and it's important that we can travel around and work freely, without being afraid of our neighbours."

Selma Boracic is an IWPR-trained reporter in Sarajevo.

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