

MINORITIES IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: BETWEEN SEEMING TOLERANCE AND REAL DISREGARD

Minority rights, the attitude towards minorities, and the way in which all those who fall outside the majority context are treated, are the measure of the value and democratic quality of a given society. The attitude towards those who are different in whatever way, or do not fit into the mainstream society, shows the extent at which a society is ready to face the challenges of diversity and is tolerant and progressive. At first sight, this may sound like a platitude, although it is substantially about the fact that each of us individually, and we all together, as a community/society/state, have the obligation to guard and defend the most vulnerable categories in the society, who are usually “others and different ones”. No matter how often we are reiterating the obligation to protect the minority rights, we bear witness day after day, individually, every one of us according to one’s own experience, and at community level, to violations of those rights or to the full negligence of diversity in a modern society. This is why it is important to ask ourselves about the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding the minorities, their rights and problems they are facing every day.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a specific and unique country in every respect, including the situation of minorities, their rights and the way they are treated. The minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina are understood in various, often contradictory ways, which results in multiple approaches to minority issues, which vary from one minority group to another. Namely, the minorities, if we understand them as communities defined by the territory they belong to and their size in a certain territory, can be considered as ethnic/cultural/national... In BiH, when it comes to ethnic/national groups, we differentiate between the two understandings of the notion of a minority. One is the understanding of minorities as *constituent minorities* (the notion introduced by Professor Ugo Vlaisavljevic), and the other understanding of minorities includes citizens of BiH who are referred to as *others*. The constituent minorities consist of members of constituent peoples in BiH, those who live in part of the territory/in the entity in which they do not constitute a prevailing group: Serbs in the Federation of BiH, and Croats and Bosniaks in the RS, while the category of “others” includes the so-called national minorities – a total of 17 in BiH: Albanians, Montenegrins, Czechs, Italians, Jews, Hungarians, Macedonians, Germans, Poles, the Roma, Romanians, Russians, Ruthenians, Slovaks, Slovenians, Turks and Ukrainians. (www.oscebih.org/.../nationalminorities.asp). Another unique characteristic of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s context is reflected in the fact that also *citizens* are a minority in BiH, that is, those who chose not to have their ethnic identity as the only or main determining factor of their identity. In this context, there is also a kind of absurdity; namely, even those citizens who are *Bosnians* (instead of being Serbs, Bosniaks or Croats) constitute a minority in BiH. Generally, in the society of Bosnia and Herzegovina, attention is given mainly to the situation of constituent minorities, while “others” are mentioned most of the time in the context of some apt occasions (their holidays, political visits to their communities etc.) or of an incident (involving a minority group member as the victim or the perpetrator), while the category of “citizens of BiH” is completely ignored. Also, all three categories of minorities are

quite often used for political purposes; they are manipulated for current politics purposes, and in the rhetoric of politicians who pay lip service to the minority rights, only pretending to protect them, which certainly does not contribute to improving the minority rights record - on the contrary!

Even the glib analysts of the minority rights situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina have a clear understanding that our society is not yet fully prepared to face challenges of diversity, although tolerance and coexistence of diversities are mentioned too often as a specific feature of BiH's society. However, every euphoric and affirmative talk about coexistence and tolerance in Bosnia and Herzegovina contains a reference to a harmonious relationship among different ethnic and other groups before the war, over twenty years ago. This alone raises concerns. "The societies with tolerance clearly in place do not need to promote tolerance on billboards," is a witty and above all accurate remark by a domestic intellectual from a few years ago, alluding to ever more frequent media campaigns launched by different international organizations with the aim to raise citizens' awareness of the obligation to protect the minority rights.

The citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina say that they tolerate "others and different ones", although real-life examples show that whenever the minorities do insist on their rights and whenever the majority population is asked to demonstrate the real tolerance, there is no positive reaction, or even intolerance, and in some instances hatred, are demonstrated clearly and publicly. That intolerance is not related exclusively to ethnic diversities or constituent minorities (although conflicts with and hate language against the members of different ethnic groups and reactions thereto are given much space in the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina). However, far more frequent are the examples of resistance to diversity which is not related to ethnic or national identification of a person or a group of persons (like Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks, for instance). Still, they do not strike a responsive chord in the public. For example, there is a well-known case from 2009, when a mother took her daughter out of kindergarten only because the Roma children were in the same kindergarten. Her argument was that "it is not advisable to mix up with them"; or the statement by the director of the Dormitories in Sarajevo, from July 2009 – asked about the right of homosexuals to live in the Dormitory, he said, "Neither do such rules exist nor do I want to have anything with such people! I am not interested in homosexuals, and, frankly, my message to them is that they should build their own dormitory, which would be miles away from our dorms! If they do not want to do that, let the state make one for them! There is no tolerance in this regard, for such persons, in my view, are not quite clear about who they are! Why should I need them as such under my roof? The only thing they, as such, can do is to stir up commotion among students, and troubles will be inevitable" (the daily *SAN*, 8 July, 2009). Those two examples were not strongly criticized by the public. Only some non-governmental organizations reacted, which only supports the belief that BiH citizens are mainly sensitive to violations of the rights of constituent minorities, while either they are not thinking about any other minority group at all or they believe that it is simply "doomed" to difficulties and problems, which is their fate, and that nothing can be changed either on individual or group level.

Another problem relating to minorities concerns the language used to describe them, which is the *language of value judgments*, void of the force of argument. The language of value judgments is improvable in itself, and cannot paint a comprehensible, clear-headed picture of the minorities. Instead, the minorities are painted black-and-white (“we-they”, “ours-theirs”, “belonging-not belonging”), they are degraded or overemphasized. The references made to the minorities are arbitrary and without valid arguments, and the public understands them as something exotic, radically different and incompatible, and hence the notion of tolerance is understood as “putting up with somebody else’s presence” and not as coexistence with them. Apt media reporting about the minorities (exclusive reporting on ethnic holidays, customs etc., or political visits to some minority groups) gives a very limited scope of information about others and different ones, which provides fertile ground for developing stereotypes, while a strong emphasis on the incidents involving perpetrators from minority groups encourages public fear and intolerance towards diversity. We can often read and see in the media the examples of degrading the Roma, pinning labels on the Roma population, describing them as “problematic”, “violent” etc. When an incident involving the Roma happens, their full names are given in sensational headlines, even if they are minors, with almost an obligatory remark that they belong to the Roma minority. An illustrative example is the story featured in the daily newspaper *Dnevni list* (February 2005), on the basis of an unverified report from unnamed sources, according to which the Roma had attempted to kidnap two children (which was also explicitly said already in the headline). The author admitted at the end of the story that it was not clear whether or not there had been any kidnapping, but added the following comment, “Still, we are aware of the fact that the Roma go wherever and whenever they want, which is the reason why not only children but adults too do not feel comfortable.” (See Halilović, Mehmed: *Diskriminacija i mržnja na balkanski način*: http://www.netnovinar.org/netnovinar/dsp_page.cfm?articleid). This is a classic example of the hate language which is based on the prejudices against the Roma who are believed to pose a threat to others and make other people feel uncomfortable in their presence.

When we talk about the majority-minority relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we can conclude that the majority group is declaratively tolerant. However, when a concrete action needs to be taken, the minorities can expect only ignorance or a distorted picture about them, even a direct demonstration of animosity. There is the practice of forgetting the fact (either willingly or unwillingly) that the minorities seek recognition and adaptation to their cultural (and other) differences, and not tolerance in terms of bearing or putting up with someone different; as a consequence, the minorities are guaranteed freedoms and rights only declaratively, to the extent at which the current situation remains unchanged. So long as they are reduced to the level of an exotic group and so long as they remain a minority, the community is ready to “tolerate” them (put up with them), and as soon as the balance changes, the majority refuses to recognize the minority’s rights. Struggle for minority rights is not (and should not be) the struggle for having the majority notice, understand and accept the minority, but the struggle for the recognition of equal rights and for the minority’s *invisibility in a positive sense* (in which case it would not be necessary for someone to stress that he/she is a minority to realize his/her fundamental right). In the present situation, *minorities are invisible in a negative*

sense (or are assimilated /BiH Diaspora/ or isolated and unaccepted / Roma/ or hide their identity /queer population/).

Every one of us and all of us together, as a community, are responsible for the status and situation of the minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia-Herzegovina's society has to develop and demonstrate more strongly the sensibility towards differences, simply because of the fact that if we understand minority groups as the *communities at the level of consciousness* (of identification, worldview), *then everybody, depending of circumstances, is a minority* (by his or her appearance, sexual orientation, music he/she listens to, books he/she reads, choice to practice or not to practice religion, etc.). This is why it is necessary to emphasize time and time again that the situation of minorities is a measure of the maturity level of the majority. As professor Stjepan Malovic noticed, "We do not respect the minority only because of the minority, but we respect our need to take care, as the majority, of the minority, to ensure its equality and all the rights that we, the majority, have. When the majority stops caring for the minority, it will shortly after be in the same situation as the minority, for restrictions to minority freedoms is only the first step to restricting freedoms of all of us".

Lejla Turčilo (turcilol@fpn.unsa.ba) is a docent at the Faculty of Political Sciences, the University of Sarajevo, at which she also serves as a coordinator of the Faculty's international cooperation. She has taken an active part in numerous conferences, roundtables and research projects. She is the author of the book "On-line komuniciranje i off-line politika u BiH (2006)" and co-author of a number of publications about the media, communications and minorities in a public discourse.