

How to fix a broken window?

Op-Ed by Ambassador Kathleen Kavalec, 3 February 2020

It is perhaps not surprising that when the window of the Carsija Mosque in Kozarska Dubica was broken one night in January, local residents worried that the event was triggered by ethnic hatred. In a land that has suffered the disastrous consequences of inter-ethnic war, something as simple as breaking a window, posting abusive graffiti or hanging up an offensive poster can provoke anxiety and fear, particularly at a time when social media is often used as an accelerant to spread misunderstanding, hatred -- and even violence. Fixing a broken window may be easy, but recognizing and repairing the damage caused by hate speech and hate crimes in a society that is still recovering from the trauma of war is another matter entirely.

As parents and citizens, we hope for a peaceful and prosperous world, and we toil in our daily lives to build a society worthy of our dreams for our children. We all feel the effect of a divided, distrustful society and we recognize instinctively that division and hate pose a risk to peace. We look to our leaders for direction and hope in troubled times. We ask many things of our politicians, possible and impossible, but the most important thing citizens should expect is that those who seek to be elected provide leadership that avoids provoking division and hatred.

The year ahead, 2020, will be a challenging one to navigate in Bosnia and Herzegovina, full as it is of important milestones: twenty-five years since the Dayton Peace Accords were signed to end fighting and suffering across all of BiH; a quarter of a century since the single biggest atrocity in Europe since WWII, the genocide in Srebrenica. Meanwhile, another round of municipal elections in the fall will undoubtedly serve to provoke political tensions. In this context, some have argued that it is too late to work on real reconciliation and others say it is too early. I say the time is now.

Unfortunately, many of the societal fault lines that Dayton tried to repair still exist, along with the temptation to use the ethnic card to attack political opponents and gain votes, an approach that risks inflaming ethnic hatreds. For example, we have witnessed threats against an orthodox parish priest in Blagaj on the occasion of a celebration of the Assumption of Mary, the

vandalizing of a catholic cemetery in Veresika, and more recently, divisive displays of nationalism in Srebrenica, Bratunac Foča, and Visegrad during Orthodox Christmas celebrations.

My visit to Srebrenica few days ago was difficult and emotional - I saw first-hand how divisive narratives can hurt communities and undermine progress and prosperity.

Playing the card of division might seem to offer quick and easy results, but history shows that doing so is a poisonous, risky game that does not lead to a stronger, more prosperous and peaceful society, one that serves the needs of its citizens. What is needed is a different, wiser and more visionary approach: leadership that brings people together, builds on the strengths of diversity, promotes trust and understanding, and builds unity.

This kind of leadership exists today in Bosnia and Herzegovina, if you know where to look. In Blagaj and Veresika, for example, local leaders condemned the aforementioned incidents, and responded to the need to prevent tensions from escalating and to restore trust in the community. In Bosanski Petrovac, when two men were photographed provocatively wearing nationalistic insignia, the Mayor issued a strong public appeal for calm, cohesiveness and solidarity among citizens.

Another example of wise leadership can be found in Kozarska Dubica, where the community came together to fix the window broken in the mosque. The Mayor publicly condemned the attack and offered to pay to repair the damage. After the police identified who was behind it, the responsible individuals accompanied by their parents met the Majlis of the Islamic Community. Under the watchful eyes of their elders, they expressed remorse, asked for forgiveness, and indicated they would pay to fix the broken window and related damage. Forgiveness was granted, and the group retired to a coffee house to reflect on the understanding they had achieved.

Such a simple story, but yet so inspiring. We may not know what motivated the individuals to break the window, or whether they understood at the time the pain and alarm it would cause. Perhaps they were young and didn't realize the risks to themselves and their own community. What we do know is that leaders in the town did not look away or dismiss the incident, but rather took on the responsibility to condemn the action, investigate it, identify the cause, promote community dialogue and so repair the damage – along with the window.

Combatting provocative acts and rhetoric is crucial, but prevention is even more important. Wise leaders find ways to sow the positive seeds of trust and cohesion in local communities. Bosanski Petrovac, for example, is home to *Mountaineers without prejudice*, a civil society network of mountaineers from different backgrounds who joined forces to show how recreational activities can not only improve the community but contribute to understanding, reconciliation and peacebuilding. In Žepče, the community – led by an association of victims from all sides -- came together in 2017 to build a unique monument – so far the only one like it in BiH -- to all civilian victims of war. Since 2018, every 9 October local authorities lay a wreath at the monument to officially mark the Žepče Municipal Day, thus demonstrating one important way a wounded society can address its tragic past, build bridges and work for common future.

Experience suggests that more metaphorical windows could be broken as the election campaign heats up and we observe other important dates. But this doesn't have to happen. With the right political and civic leadership, it is possible to reduce the likelihood of hate speech and point the country in a more positive direction. In this spirit, the OSCE Mission to BiH proposes the following measures for 2020:

- Asking political parties and candidates for local elections to pledge to respect healthy dialogue and restrain from inflammatory and negative rhetoric.
- Encouraging the press and social media users to highlight voices committed to building an inclusive society, and to verify facts and screen out disinformation.
- Supporting political dialogue and discussions that focus on solving problems and addressing issues of concern to the citizens.

Kozarska Dubica – and many other communities like it – have shown us the best way to fix a broken window. It is time, though, that we strive to keep our windows intact in the first place.