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**Exploring History Education in Primary Schools and
its Impact on Students' Attitudes
Toward Other Ethnic Groups
in Divided Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Thesis Booklet

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Budapest, 2023

ABSTRACT

This study explores the complexity of history education in Bosnia and Herzegovina's primary schools, investigating its multifaceted influence on students' historical understanding and attitudes towards diverse ethnic communities. The research delves into the intricate interplay of in-school and external history learning sources, showcasing the evolution of students' understanding, favoured learning modalities, and prevailing perspectives. Utilizing a comprehensive methodology encompassing 345 structured surveys and 11 expert-based semi-structured interviews, the study unveils the crucial roles played by teachers, curriculum configuration, and external stimulus in shaping historical consciousness. The study's findings diverge from conventional expectations, revealing a nuanced narrative: the potential of history education, in its ethnically tailored form, and to subtly shape students' perceptions. The emergence of documentaries as influential conduits for historical information, alongside the amplification of social media platforms and the rapid expansion of the internet, reflects a transformative shift in the educational landscape. This shift underscores the urgency of recalibrating pedagogical strategies and curricula to harness these emerging trends that can foster profound historical understanding, empathy, and unity within the intricate diversity of ethnically divided communities. This research contributes substantively to ongoing dialogues surrounding history education's role in divided societies. By engaging directly with students' viewpoints, this study informs educational policies that aspire to nurture agreement, inclusivity, and a comprehensive grasp of the past as building blocks for a harmonious future.

Keywords: Deeply divided societies, history education, Bosnia and Herzegovina, students' attitudes

I. CHOICE OF THE TOPIC AND ITS JUSTIFICATION

No single authority or organization defines what constitutes a historical fact. Still, it is widely accepted as true information about past events, people, or things, and it is backed up by evidence like primary sources, eyewitness accounts, and other types of documentation. But it is important to remember that bias or ideology can change how historical facts are interpreted and presented. Szentes (2013) states: "Science does not exist without the assessment of facts, the collection and use of data. However, the facts can be suppressed or distorted, the data can be mixed up in many ways, and the indicators made from them can be used to simplify and even falsify the representation and explanation of the complicated and changing reality" (Szentes, 2013, in Almadi, 2023). Therefore, thinking about what historical facts entail is critical, considering where the information came from and the presenter's potential biases (Loewen, 2018). Accordingly, verifying historical facts requires assessing the credibility of primary and secondary sources and analysing them in the context of the time and culture in which they were created.

History education and historical facts are inextricably linked because history education aims to construct an understanding on what happened in the past and what it all means (Wineburg, 2001). Historical facts serve as the foundation for historical consciousness, which entails acknowledging the role of history in shaping our world and how we perceive and interpret it (Angvik & Borries, 1997, 41; Wineburg, 2001; Seixas, 2004, 1-27; Bender, 2010). Therefore, history education lays the groundwork for interpreting historical facts and recognizing patterns and trends. However, in divided societies, history education is often under the influence of politics, and historical facts are frequently manipulated in many ways to serve ethnic narratives¹ that are politically designed to establish and reinforce ethnic identity, to create a shared history among members of an ethnic group or community (Bakić-Hayden, 1995, 837-858; Rasmussen, 1997, 18-

¹ Ethnic narratives refer to the stories, myths, and histories based on an ethnic point of view.

36; Odo, 1985, 9-23), and, eventually, to set the stage for developing some kind of attitude toward other people, groups, or countries.²

Ethnic narratives can be learned from the official version, taught in state-run schools, or from many other places, such as parents, peers, books, the media, the internet, social media, cultural institutions (like museums, theatre, radio), etc. These narratives are closely related to politically constructed social identities and self-awareness and membership in a particular group (Brubaker et al., 2006; Tajfel and Turner, 1979, 33-47). According to Van den Berghe (1990), ethnic narratives are essential in constructing social identities because they help define the boundaries between different groups and establish a sense of belonging. "Ethnicity is not a given, but rather a socially constructed category that emerges through interactions among people with different cultural backgrounds" (Van den Berghe, 1990, 972-984). In post-conflict recovery communities, history education of the school systems is significantly exposed to interventions of fluid political interests that include considerably simplified or biased ethnic narratives, causing intergroup tensions and maintaining negative attitudes among contending groups. In Bosnia, Čehajić-Clancy (2013) and, in Sudan, the International Crisis Group (2012) find that the school system is often used to reinforce negative stereotypes and maintain power imbalances, which can contribute to ongoing conflict and tensions. (Čehajić-Clancy & Delić, 2013; International Crisis Group, 2012). Additionally, textbooks and teachers, as well as school material, can influence and shape diverse narratives that maintain negative attitudes along generations (Anderson, 1991; Gellner, 1983; Smith, 1986; Keddie, 1971)³.

The strong link between history education and the perpetuation of negative attitudes among contending groups can be best observed in deeply divided societies (Horowitz, 1985; Ron, 2003), and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), a country with a long and complex history of ethnic conflict, stands out as one of the best examples among them. The Bosnian and Herzegovinian education system has utilized the ethnic narratives of communities. Accordingly, Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs

² Most of their embodiments are negative. Prejudices, stereotypes, discriminations, hostilities, aggressions, exclusions, segregation, fears, and suspicions are all examples of negative attitudes.

³ Anderson (1991), Gellner (1983), and Smith (1986) are given for references to the importance of textbooks, while Keddie (1971) is given for the teachers.

learn historical facts through different education systems⁴ that reflect their respective cultural and political backgrounds, reproducing ethnic and/or religious cleavages and increasing social distance between groups (Besgul, Ozoflu, 2019, 8-9), resulting in a lack of shared understanding.

In 2019, Canton Sarajevo's Education Ministry introduced the additional subjects of the "Siege of Sarajevo (April 1992 to February 1996)" and the "Genocide in BiH (1992-1995)" into history curriculum for the first time. This curriculum reform was possible after the Council of Europe Moratorium on teaching of the historical period of the Bosnian War was lifted.⁵ Since then, new history subjects have also been introduced in the *Republika Srpska* (RS)⁶ and other cantons in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH). These subjects have become highly controversial within civil society, academia, and the international community and raised concerns of lack of multiperspectivity in history education, inadequate teacher training, and politicization of curriculum subjects (Balkan insight, 2019 and 2020). This has not helped develop a standardized approach⁷ to history education countrywide. Moreover, it is likely that it intensified the deep-rooted tendency of one-sided history teaching, which divides the actors of the War in BiH deliberately into victims as "we" and perpetrators as "they." Finally, it is not yet known how the curriculum reform will affect in the long- term the current generation of students in the country, influencing, therefore, the political future of BiH.

Most literature in the field concerns ethnically based educational reforms, religious instruction, textbooks, and separate classrooms. Paulson conducted an up-to-date systematic review of history education literature on recent and ongoing conflicts in 2015. Accordingly, many studies in history education use textbook analysis (Al-Haj, 2005; Bar Tal, 1998; Paulson, 2010b; Torsti, 2007; Young, 2010), while others use a hybrid approach (Oglesby, 2007; Paulson, 2010a;

⁴ The education system in Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided along ethnic lines, with separate schools for Bosniak, Croat, and Serb children. Each group has its own curricula and textbooks that reflect their respective historical narratives.

⁵ According to the Council of Europe in its 'Recommendation 1454 (2000) Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina' (April 2000), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe developed a moratorium on teaching the period 1992- 1995 in BiH until historians in BiH, with the support of international experts, could develop a common approach towards teaching this period in the classroom.

⁶ BiH is a parliamentary democracy with a complex state structure that is based on the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the Bosnian War in 1995. The country consists of two entities, the FBiH and the RS, as well as the Brcko District, which is a self-governing administrative unit.

⁷ Recommendation 1454 (2000) Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina' (April 2000).

Sanchez Meertens, 2013; Staeheli & Stammer, 2013; Torsti, 2009). The limitations of textbook analysis as a research method have been convincingly argued, and this approach tells us little about how teachers and students learn about history (Worden, 2014). Authors interested in developed attitudes of students⁸ in the literature of history education remain limited. One of the early precursors, Freire criticized the education system as it serves the interests of the oppressors, minimizes creative and critical thinking, and results in submissive attitudes (Freire, 1997). Authors such as Torsti (2003) focused on students through both narratives of the history textbooks and the historically constructed attitudes of youth in BiH; others, such as Besgul and Ozoflu (2018), elaborated on how ethnic and or religious fractures between communities were generated through the education system. Overall, historical narratives presented in schools and their reflection on students are often inadequate. Therefore, there is still a lot to learn about how the attitudes of primary school students toward history and other ethnic groups change after they receive history education in school.

Consequently, while this dissertation research considers the holistic context of BiH society, where adolescents develop attitudes, it is primarily concerned with determining how much history education in primary schools influences students' attitudes toward other groups in BiH⁹. To what extent history education and politics are important to them and what do they learn, their motivation, and what are their expectations, if any, when receiving these lectures. These are relevant questions to determine the impact of the school system in BiH on the country's political future, focusing on history education.

The dissertation investigates the ethnically designed history education in schools (e.g., curriculum, textbooks, and teacher presentations) and its link with constructed historical understanding and negative attitudes toward other ethnic groups in the deeply divided society of BiH. In other words: Does the history lectures develop positive, negative, or neutral attitudes of

⁸ The research focuses mainly on 9th-grade primary school students when they learn for the first time about the Bosnian War and other groups in the country. It has been assumed that students of this age would provide the most valuable data on the impact of non-school history education sources and rapid changes in students' attitudes.

⁹ The term "Bosnian" encompasses various elements related to the contemporary nation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This includes referring to matters such as wars, populations, churches, and other aspects pertaining to the country's Bosnian and Herzegovinian regions. The term "Bosnian" is a convenient way to encompass the entire scope of the modern state and its diverse cultural, historical, and geographical components. When the term "BiH" is used, it refers to the country itself, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

students toward other ethnic groups in the context of various historical facts given in the schools. This has been done in a student-centered approach through the self-evaluation of the primary school students for their attitude and behavior after receiving lectures for the first time in school along with, in some cases, divided classrooms set by the recent last war. This study also intends to examine the prevalence of ethnic segregation and ethnic politics surrounding students outside of school settings to understand the impact of history education in schools. The following related research questions are examined after the research problems and gaps found in literature review:

- 1 How does history education in primary schools, including curricula, textbooks, and teachers' lessons, affect students' historical knowledge and attitudes toward other ethnic groups in the divided society of BiH?
- 2 How do primary students learn historical facts outside school? To what extent these sources are guiding them in developing historical understanding?
- 3 What are the most influential sources for primary school students to learn historical facts from?

The proposed focus of this dissertation research and its subsequent findings offer academically relevant and practical content in multiple ways. Firstly, by determining the influence of history lessons in public schools on students' understanding of history and attitudes towards other groups in BiH, it provides a significant contribution to the existing academic literature. Beyond the recent developments in the country, the limitations and need for academic research on this specific focus area have been repeatedly echoed by leading scholars (see Torsti 2003, 334-335; Cole and Barsalou 2006, 14-15; Paulson, 2015) and reconfirmed after expert interviews were undertaken between November to December 2022 to inform this dissertation.

Secondly, it provides a foundation for the design of well-thought political interventions in post-conflict countries to change the intensity of negative attitudes, fostering social cohesion among conflicting groups. Any considered intervention in history teaching toward social cohesion that this research aims to define in the communities of BiH opens an avenue for valuable change in the country and the region, making this research genuinely relevant for the Doctoral School of International Relations and Political Science.

Furthermore, the results of this research might serve the scholars who explore the nexus between education and conflict resolution/peacebuilding from the theoretical and practical point of view as well as broad interest networks, which include teachers, education experts, and policymakers who seek to build a peaceful society in deeply divided communities.

Lastly, this dissertation' findings have also the potential to inform the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus programs of international organizations operating in BiH, mainly by the United Nations (UN) agencies.

II. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The thesis employs a mixed-methods research approach, incorporating quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the correlation between history education and students' attitudes toward ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The study involves fully structured surveys and semi-structured interviews to collect data from various sources, including students, university professors, primary school teachers, and international organization experts.

The research surveyed 9th-grade students from different schools in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and Republika Srpska (RS). The sample size was determined through mathematical calculations considering the total 9th-grade student population. Purposive judgment sampling was applied to ensure a representative demographic spread. The surveys contained questions related to attitudes towards other ethnic groups, perceptions of history lessons, and sources of historical knowledge.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with various experts, including university professors, primary school teachers, and representatives from international organizations. These interviews aimed to provide deeper insights into students' experiences and the educational landscape. The qualitative data analysis utilized the template analysis technique, categorizing and extracting essential information from the interview responses.

Both types of data were collected simultaneously, focusing on maximizing each method's strengths while mitigating their respective limitations. The quantitative data were given precedence during analysis, with qualitative data complementing and enriching the findings.

Critical Aspects Influencing Research Design:

Timing: Due to practical constraints, quantitative and qualitative data collection occurred concurrently, enhancing efficiency.

Weighting: The study assigned a more significant weight to quantitative data analysis while using qualitative data to provide supportive context.

Mixing: The two datasets were initially kept separate but were eventually integrated during interpretation to facilitate comparison and understanding.

Theorizing: The research design was guided by the theoretical framework of Historical Constructivism, aligning with the study's investigative direction.

III. RESULTS

The research collected comprehensive data through 345 structured interviews with students and 11 semi-structured interviews involving experts in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These interviews explored students' attitudes towards history education and its potential influence on interethnic relations.

- Among the structured interviews, the participants' average age was around 14 years, typically corresponding to the 9th grade. This grade is significant as it marks the introduction of lessons about the Bosnian War and the diverse ethnic groups within the country. Language preferences were utilized as a proxy for ethnicity, with Bosniak-speaking students being the most prominent group (72%), followed by Croat-speaking (21%) and Serbian-speaking students (6%).
- The qualitative component of the research, represented by semi-structured interviews, provided more profound insights into the sensitivities surrounding history education. These interviews were conducted across the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and the Republic of Srpska (RS), capturing various perspectives. The average age of participants in this segment was approximately 46.8 years.
- The study highlighted the significance of students' self-evaluations in understanding their interests in history and politics. While a clear link between these interests was not established, students' enthusiasm for history classes fostered engagement and interaction with teachers and educational materials. This has implications for effective teaching methods and a conducive learning environment.
- Interestingly, the study revealed that most students, particularly Bosniaks, hold a positive view of the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although a direct correlation between political and historical interest was not evident, history lectures had the potential to be captivating, influencing students' perspectives throughout their education.

- One investigation aimed to understand students' primary motivations for learning historical facts, with "Understanding the Present" being a prominent choice. This suggests that students can connect historical events to their contemporary cultural environment. Additionally, students placed a higher value on "Orientation to the Future" than "Knowledge of the Past," indicating that their interest in history is driven by a desire to comprehend both present and future complexities.
- Despite these observations, the study found that students' motivation and interest in history could inadvertently contribute to unfriendly attitudes between ethnic groups. The intertwining of politics and history education, where historians often double as politicians, influences curriculum design across different ethnicities. Consequently, history education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, regardless of ethnicity, has the potential to nurture negative attitudes towards other ethnic groups through the subtle inclusion of hate rhetoric in textbooks.
- The research examined how students from different ethnic backgrounds perceive various historical narratives taught in their country. Findings indicated that many students were aware of these distinctions, although some had limited awareness. Overall, a notable level of awareness existed, with slight variation across ethnic groups. This suggests a widespread recognition of diverse historical perspectives within the country.
- Students generally viewed their historical knowledge quality favorably. Notably, Bosniak students demonstrated the highest levels of self-awareness, followed by Croat and Serb students. This observation underscores a positive self-perception regarding historical comprehension, though with some variations among ethnic groups.
- The study unveiled a strong connection between students and teachers, with a substantial portion expressing "Very high" trust. However, a few students expressed uncertainties about their teachers' expertise. Trust levels were highest among Croat students, followed by Bosniaks and Serbs. Students' perceptions of trust slightly decreased when extended to teachers' broader interpretations. Croat-

speaking students, once again, displayed the most trust, followed by Bosniaks and Serbs.

- The research delved into the relationship between teachers' interpretations and trust, highlighting teachers' significant impact on students within the context of history education. The study also emphasized the importance of teachers' interpretations of historical facts in shaping students' attitudes toward other ethnic groups. However, concerns were raised, including the complexities of teachers' roles within the politically charged educational landscape.
- Teachers in the Republic of Srpska expressed concerns about potential job loss due to perceived government affiliations. This sheds light on the intricate political dynamics where teachers must navigate, potentially affecting their job security and teaching approaches.
- Contrary to the hypothesis, the research findings from students suggested that history education might not significantly shape interethnic relationships at this level of education. Many students reported positive interethnic friendships and feelings of safety among peers from different ethnic backgrounds. This implies that factors beyond history education play a more substantial role in shaping interethnic relations.
- The study also explored external sources that contribute to students' historical learning. Documentaries emerged as influential resources, capturing students' attention through dynamic visual narratives. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok were identified as influential sources, reflecting the digital age's impact on learning.
- Learning from families, particularly parents, continued to be relevant. This suggests that intergenerational knowledge transmission plays a vital role in shaping historical understanding. Overall, some students favored these alternative sources over traditional classroom history education, indicating a shift in how historical content is engaged with, driven by interactive and personally resonant learning experiences.

- The study also recognized the transformative influence of the internet on education. With limited time for history classes, students turned to the internet to explore specific historical inquiries independently. The internet's vast resources allowed students to engage with historical content that piqued their curiosity, highlighting the evolving role of technology in education.
- In conclusion, the research provided valuable insights into the complex relationship between history education and attitudes toward ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It emphasized the importance of teachers' roles, alternative learning sources, and evolving trends in shaping students' perspective.

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V. PUBLICATIONS

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