Implementing the Liberal Peace in Post-conflict Scenarios: The Case of Women in Black-Serbia

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Abstract

This article explores the complex, and often unintended, consequences of NGO struggles to implement the normative claims embedded in discourses of liberal peace in post-conflict situations. We study Women in Black-Serbia (WIB) to examine the tensions between WIB’s adoption of a liberal, radically feminist, deterritorialized and individualistic conceptualization of peace, its development of politics and political strategies in accord with the nationalistic identities it has purported to reject, and the organization of its advocacy for peace around the memorialization of war victims. We argue, in a very polarized political climate and in the context of a heavy presence of international stakeholders, that WIB activism may produce the unintended consequence of hardening existing war identities and conflict positions. This article assesses NGOs, not mainly for the quality of their normative claims or putative roles, but as political agents whose discourses, tactics and practices are evaluated in the context of their interactions with other (local and international) actors. More broadly, this analysis illuminates the unexplored conundrums, complexities and ambiguities associated with implementation of the liberal peace in a highly polarized political space, and in the context of multi-stakeholder peace-building processes.

Policy Implications

• Bilateral donors and multilateral organizations should assess their support for NGO advocacy activities in post-conflict situations, not only based upon general normative claims, but in a thoroughly contextualized manner.
• Because NGO peace-oriented advocacy activities may create unexpected and even perverse consequences as a result of mediating political and social factors, NGOs must be considered as concrete political actors involved in complex contexts and their actions evaluated by policy makers accordingly.
• Policy-maker assumptions concerning the effects of normative claims, especially regarding justice and guilt and the memorialization of war-related atrocities, merit careful analysis. Such efforts cannot simply be assumed to conduce to peace, as often they may not.
• International donors and policy makers should consider crafting broad-based strategies for moving the political debate away from war-related concerns. Policies aimed at fostering broad economic opportunities and increased economic integration may help to foster propitious conditions for political reconciliation.

The reframing of international security as human security and the increasing interest of international organizations in directly intervening to protect populations from an array of dangers – from poverty to gross violations of human rights – have opened new spaces for nongovernamental organization (NGO) action, funding and engagement. The United Nations (UN) Department of Peacekeeping Operations 2008 Manual for Integrated Peacekeeping Missions recognized this changed reality by emphasizing the importance of coordinating with ‘the range of humanitarian and development actors involved in international crisis management … where the United Nations peacekeeping operations are deployed’ (UN DPKO, 2008, p. 10). This reconceptualization of security reflects an emerging consensus among states, NGOs and international organizations around what Oliver Richmond (2005) has called the ‘liberal peace’. This view imagines peace as ‘a concurrent agreement between state and non-state actors on universal human needs, the provision of which brings a form
of peace associated with world society’ (Richmond, 2005, p. 98).

The ongoing redefinition of international security, the blurring of boundaries among participants in governance that it entails, the changing character of its actors and referents as well as the increasing role of NGOs in national and international governance that it implies, are neither unproblematic nor uncontroversial. Some analysts have praised this phenomenon as a signal of bottom-up democratization of the international system (Kaldor, 2003; Lipschutz and Rowe, 2005; Thomas, 2001); others see the engagement of civil society entities in international politics as containing the seeds of a revolutionary possibility that will organize the ‘multitude’ to bring down the capitalist system (Hardt and Negri, 2000). Liberal and constructivist analyses of the work of NGOs and of community-based organizations of varying sorts have focused on their role in mediating conflict, promoting social learning (Brown and Timmer, 2006) and developing linking and bridging social capital (Edwards and Foley, 2001). Scholars inspired by Foucault, meanwhile, have argued that the NGO movement has been captured and now represents a liberal form of biopolitical empire, aimed at containing migration and fostering security for rich nations’ populations (Duffield, 2007). Critics of international interventionism, whether through international governmental organizations (IGOs) or NGOs, contend that it leads to the erosion of traditional state-based forms of democratic representation (Bickerton et al., 2007) which eventually, by externalizing political claims, delegitimize governments and thereby encourage international disorder (Badie, 2000). Viewed through this lens, NGOs do not necessarily open alternative and more democratic ways of organizing politics, but instead represent another instance of hegemonic and destabilizing security strategies exerted through civil society by interested states or multinational corporations (Duffield, 2007; Duffield and Waddell, 2006).

The liberal peace, NGOs and post-conflict scenarios

Notwithstanding this heated debate, and barring a few exceptions, ‘in the literature, civil society has been normally discussed and analyzed in Western, peaceful, democratic and developed contexts’ (Marchetti and Tocci, 2009, p. 201). Because similar circumstances cannot be assumed in post-conflict societies, such situations constitute an important but underexplored field for analysis and assessment of NGO efforts. In Richmond’s words, proponents of variants of a liberal peace, whether supporters of international organizations or cosmopolitan theorists, consider ‘civil society actors and their transnational connections as if they are divorced from the power of the state and norms of the international system’ (Richmond, 2005, p. 98). Indeed, ‘within such debates there is an implicit acceptance of the norms and regimes associated with pluralism and democracy, human rights and social welfare’ (Richmond, 2005, p. 100). However, the relative accuracy, utility and unintended effects of such implicit normative assumptions in post-conflict situations merit further exploration. As Richmond has aptly observed,

There has been little research on the nature of the liberal peace project, how one gains consent for it, how it is legitimized, how actors learn in this context, how humanitarian assistance and aid, democratization, development, free market reform and globalization actually fit together, how they overlap and where they may impede each other (Richmond, 2005, p. 230).

Through exploration of the case of Women in Black (WIB)-Belgrade (hereafter, following the group’s own practice, we use this descriptor, Women in Black, WIB or Women in Black-Serbia to refer to this civil society advocacy group) this article begins to address this gap by examining the largely unexplored interactions between discourses, tactics and practices deployed by one community-based NGO and other stakeholders of the liberal peace, for example the state, other types of NGOs, international organizations and local societies in post-conflict situations.1

Exploring WIB advocacy and the liberal peace

WIB-Serbia was born of a transnational social justice movement. It seeks the remediation of specific justice claims arising from the war in Yugoslavia and envisages the development of a new society as the basis of their resolution. This article outlines how this radical feminist NGO organizes its political discourse, what instruments it employs to carry out its advocacy and political claims and how its leaders relate to other civil society organizations and donors, the Serbian state and IGOs. Our analysis also assesses how, in a social and political context characterized by the persistence of conflict-related identities, nationalistic discourses and heavy international presence, WIB activism produces both intended and unintended consequences. We contend that the Serbian peace organization has embraced a liberal-cosmopolitan conceptualization of peace, which resonates with the security discourses that have emerged at the UN in recent years. WIB skillfully employs various forms of communication not only for advocacy, but also as instruments to encourage healing among the Yugoslav war’s victims. It takes advantage of the opportunities made available by globalization by networking across state borders with donors and other NGOs. It promotes connections and exchange of ideas among civil society
actors and it employs and fosters a nonterritorialized conceptualization of politics and political communities.

However, because WIB is widely viewed as supported by foreigners and operates in a political context where nationalist claims are frequently mobilized to counter perceived international interference, its largely liberal understanding of politics and peace is seen by its opponents as unduly foreign oriented, unwilling to recognize Serbian sufferings and often too willing to demonize the Serb nation state. In addition, and paradoxically, we contend that some WIB discourses and strategies remain rooted in the national and statist identity that the NGO otherwise contends it wants to protest and dismantle, and that its focus on memorializing the deaths associated with the conflict, while morally understandable, solidifies the political debate around war issues. As a result, notwithstanding the important support WIB-Serbia continues to provide for individual victims of the war, its advocacy claims often unintentionally harden the political imaginary of the community into its wartime identities.

This article does not treat the validity of WIB normative claims taken in isolation. Instead, we are interested in analyzing the effects its declarations produce in the complex political space within which they are deployed. Indeed, political claims do not occur in a vacuum, and the linkages between discourses and the context in which they are pressed constitute a key dimension for understanding NGOs as political actors. In this way, we do not essentialize WIB or the Serbian political space as marked by specific characteristics such as ‘nationalism’, or WIB as an unambiguous promoter of the liberal peace. Instead, we analyze how WIB’s organization of its advocacy claims along the liberal peace consensus, in conjunction with its framing of guilt along national lines, and its insistence on the memorialization of war crimes, contributes to further political polarization as well as to a fossilization of Serbia’s political imaginary into war identities.

Richmond (2005) has argued that the liberal peace comprises a loose set of ideas and concepts, implemented through a web of actors sharing consensus on broad notions of democracy, the need for a market economy and individual rights. NGOs help to establish the character of the liberal peace through the roles they play in negotiating with its various proponents and beneficiaries. Women in Black-Serbia operates in the aftermath of an ethnic war that divided what was once a multiethnic state, Yugoslavia, into six different nations. Some of those newfound states (Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia and Slovenia) contain areas ethnically cleansed during the conflict. International organizations (the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)), military alliances (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and the European Union (EU) have played various roles in the war, in peacekeeping and in the process of post-conflict reconstruction and peace building in the newly formed countries.

For its part, the EU has established specific admission criteria for these new nations and created a Stabilization and Association Process to guide the transformation of their local politics as they proceed toward entry. WIB-Serbia now pursues its activities in a tense and ethnically divided context – heavily scrutinized and steered by international actors. The group has actively incorporated in its discourses and practices the central tenets of the liberal peace as the UN and the EU, particularly, have developed that perspective. Women in Black-Serbia advocacy efforts also evidence some of the tensions inherent in the liberal peace between a state-based organization of politics and a universalist and individualistic understanding of rights and identities.

Serbian Women in Black leaders describe their organization as a global network of women actively working to promote peace and justice while opposing all forms of war and political violence. They view themselves and their organization as global citizens resisting patriarchy, nationalism, militarism and fundamentalism. By emphasizing the priority of people over the state and by strongly rejecting nationalism, which these leaders see as connected closely with patriarchy, WIB has defined politics in ways that share some of the human security and ‘responsibility to protect’ discourses that have redefined the UN approach to security in the new millennium.

The origins of WIB-Serbia highlight the transnational character of the organization. While the issues addressed by the Serbian group are situation specific, the WIB global network shares the tools it employs to make its claims and its main mission. Women in Black started informally as an international advocacy network of women pacifists in 1987 during the First Palestinian Intifada. In that year a group of predominantly Jewish women protested against the Israeli government’s occupation of the Gaza Strip. The number of WIB participants grew markedly in its first year of activity and the enlarged group held weekly vigils in Tel Aviv and Haifa in addition to Jerusalem. Since its origins, this initially loosely organized association of women activists has focused on advocacy and relied on pacific public displays and performances as well as on garnering mass media attention to obtain public awareness and salience for its perspective and concerns.

On 2 December 1988, to commemorate the beginning of the Intifada, the WIB-Jerusalem branch organized a mass vigil in which more than half a million women participated. Israeli television and press covered the event extensively. The program marked the official establishment of Women in Black-Israel. The organization quickly
As this statement suggests, WIB-Serbia emphasizes the priority of individuals’ rights and the duty of taking responsibility for political outcomes. The NGO’s mission embraces a cosmopolitan understanding of the universality of rights and promotes a vision of security that privileges people over states, and views civil society as the ultimate arbiter of policy legitimacy. Its discourse echoes the UN reformulation of security as human security with its identification of the main source of legitimacy and referent for the organization’s security goals as ‘the people’. For WIB, security is the legitimate demand of each individual for the absence of violence, threats and fear and the protection of every human right. ... Security is not about borders; it cannot be achieved with weapons. Just and lasting peace is the basis of security and it can only be achieved through creating a society in which all causes of war – including nationalism, patriarchy and exploitive economic systems – are eliminated (Vuskovic and Trifunovic, 2008, pp. 182–183).

Similar to the Women in Black stance, and echoing the same liberal peace consensus, the 2004 Report of the United Nations High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change redefined security as human security and accorded sovereignty based on state performance. The Panel argued that the right to exercise sovereignty fully should be conditional on a state’s willingness and capacity to protect its people, thus legitimizing various degrees of international intervention when this condition is not fulfilled. In 2005, harking back to the preamble of the United Nations Charter, the UN Secretary General had also argued that the source of legitimacy and the first referent of the United Nations as a security organization is ‘the people’. Both of these arguments suggest that states are not automatically entitled to protection. Rather, such status must be earned. This focus on protecting populations in lieu of states, which have traditionally constituted the basic building blocks of the international legal order, blurs the question of who possesses sovereignty when and why, promotes multilayered governance forms and strategies and ultimately legitimizes the UN to address populations directly (rather than states) through various instruments for monitoring and improving their lives.

With the advent of the new millennium, international security focused more and more on the optimization of processes of living together through the intensification of instruments for overseeing and controlling populations. The UN and other agencies of international governance, such as the EU, increasingly encouraged the collection of disaggregated data on populations, especially with regard to ‘vulnerable’ groups. Thus, Resolution 1325 of the Security Council in 2000 recognized women as a special category of war victims, designated them as recipients of special forms of support and argued that they were critical to the success of any peace process. WIB’s feminist focus on women as important actors in
For WIB-Serbia, feminism is a key tool for conceptualizing violence and for overcoming and breaking down the ‘patriarchal triad: sexism, nationalism, and militarism’ (Zajovic et al., 2007, p. 71). Thus, ‘as feminists, we have the obligation to violate the imposed national consensus, because this is the only way we can work for peace’ (Zajovic et al., 2007, p. 72). However, while feminist scholars’ arguments concerning ‘maternal images’ celebrating women as ‘nurturers and caregivers’ have been successful in mobilizing women in peace movements, many of those same analysts have also pointed out that the assumption of the ‘inherent pacifism of women’ reduces analyses of militarism to individual psychology (Tickner, 2001). Furthermore, an ‘ideology of women’s essential difference’ promotes a ‘biological reductionism that does not allow for change’ (Tickner, 2001, p. 59). As Tickner has observed, ‘In a context of male-dominated society, the association of men with war and women with peace also reinforces gender hierarchies and false dichotomies that contribute to the devaluation of both women and peace’ (Tickner, 2001, p. 59).

WIB defines politics in a nonstatist manner and self-consciously exploits the political opportunities created by the reformulated international discourse of security as human security and increasingly interventionist international practice in support of the liberal peace. For instance, Women in Black-Belgrade, as noted above, has creatively used the political opportunities provided by UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. While some members of the group have expressed skepticism about the resolution with the argument that peace cannot be achieved through military means, the NGO nonetheless has formally praised 1325 because it has ‘encouraged women to engage in new activities to deal with the problem of security’ (Zajovic et al., 2007, p. 185).

WIB marked the fifth anniversary of Resolution 1325 by delivering a formal declaration supporting it to the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. This move not only conveyed 1325 claims to the Serbian parliament, it also ‘localized’ the resolution by applying its demands directly to Serbia, including its requests for full secularization of the state and application of Family Law including condemnation of violence against women, revocation of the Law on Assistance to the Hague Indictees and their Families, criminalization of the denial of war crimes and so forth (Zajovic et al., 2007, pp. 188–189).

In addition to pressing its national government for change, WIB-Belgrade also actively lobbies local, regional and international constituencies. A case in point is its efforts to include the status of women in the discussion of the future of Kosovo. Women in Black shared its views concerning this thorny issue with the UN Security Council, the UN Secretary General, the Serbian Negotiations Team, Albanian Negotiations Team, the OSCE, the EU, the Contact Group and the European Commission. Not surprisingly perhaps, the NGO explicitly tied many of these advocacy efforts to Resolution 1325 (UN Security Council, 2000). Among its other provisions, the resolution highlighted the special burden women and children bear in wartime as well as their too frequent marginalization in political life. Pointing to these twin imperatives, WIB-Belgrade volunteered the assistance of a team of women’s peace networks to assist in securing an explicit role for women in the talks concerning Kosovo. While relying on 1325 as a means to press its agenda, WIB has nonetheless also distanced itself from some key UN strategies for making peace. In particular, Women in Black has consistently emphasized the need for ensuring the voice of actors besides governments in the Kosovo negotiations, as a necessary step to confer legitimacy to the process.

Women in Black-Belgrade has employed public performances, book publication and the organization of street vigils as key instruments to press its advocacy claims throughout its nearly 20-year existence. Indeed, during its relatively brief history, WIB-Serbia has organized more than 1,000 performances, petitions, public forums and vigils. After the Yugoslav war ended, these events focused heavily on highlighting the accountability of national governments and international organizations as well as civil society institutions for human rights violations and crimes that occurred during the conflict.
WIB-Serbia has coordinated travelling Women’s Workshops across the Balkans to encourage public discussion of the human rights violations perpetrated during the war, how those might be acknowledged and how some measure of justice might be achieved for those aggrieved. WIB has also actively monitored and publicized war crimes trials as these have unfolded, especially at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Women in Black members have also visited political prisoners and offered material and emotional aid to war-linked refugees and displaced persons. For example, during our visit to Belgrade in July 2009, WIB visited a gypsy community to highlight its displacement by the UniversiaDES Games. The gypsies were reportedly not offered alternative accommodation by the Serb government and their freedom of movement was limited at night. WIB not only sought to provide visibility to the plight of the group, but also to create connections between the community and institutional actors who could assist them.

Whatever its specific political or advocacy claims, the NGO has sought self-consciously to employ public displays and media to extend its reach beyond existing state borders and bring its claims to the attention of a broader international audience. WIB-Serbia has often pursued its advocacy agenda by cooperating with other activist groups, with which it has established issue-specific alliances. For example, the group has long cooperated with DAH (breath or spirit in Serbian) theatre, founded in 1991 by several women actors and directors out of a shared need to create something positive amid the ongoing destruction of the war. DAH’s first performance in 1992, ‘This Babylonian Confusion’, drew on songs by Bertolt Brecht as a testimony ‘against war, nationalism and destruction’ (http://www.dahteatarcentar.com/predstave/oavavilonskapometnja_eng.html). DAH has also worked closely with WIB to stage powerful vignettes based on the advocacy group’s oral histories of women’s family losses during the conflict. The Serbian NGO also connects on specific issue areas with other groups with different modus operandi, such as the Humanitarian Law Center, which provides legal support for war crimes trials.

WIB relies on a variety of funders, mostly on a project basis, such as interested individuals, local civil society organizations, regional organizations, international organizations as well as states to support its efforts. Among its sponsors are the Swedish women’s NGO Kvinna to Kvinna; the Heart and Hand Foundation, San Francisco; the Women’s Reconstruction Fund; and the Quaker Peace and Social Witness group, London. Thus, WIB’s funding base mirrors its transnational aspirations. This variety of supporters also testifies to the transnational character of the politics in which Women in Black is enmeshed and to the opportunities international actors may have to shape civil societies by influencing NGO agendas through financing strategies. This globalization of politics, as we will see in the next section, has also elicited nationalist criticism. Conversely, this situation also suggests the political opportunities available to NGOs to press their political claims by developing artful fundraising skills and networks aimed (at least in part) at buffering funder accountability claims. That is, since these organizations possess multiple funders and these seek accountability only for their specific purposes, creative management may allow NGOs to create operating discretion.

In addition to its range of advocacy activities, and in line with its individual-centered view of politics, WIB has actively supported women coping with the trauma of the loss of family members in the Yugoslav conflict by sponsoring activities aimed at promoting self-esteem, by facilitating connections among those so affected and by making possible public testimonies by victims of the ethnic cleansing and genocide. During and after the war, WIB supported women living in various refugee camps by providing activities that gave them at least some income and sense of self-worth. For example, during the siege of Sarajevo, when refugees began arriving in Serbia, WIB set up a knitting program in which supporters from abroad sent wool and women refugees made socks and earned income from selling them. This initiative reportedly gave the displaced women a sense of dignity and empowerment, as each was treated as an individual and not simply as one of a number of faceless refugees.3

WIB-Belgrade has also used oral history and ‘memory-writing’ as a technique for helping women cope with the emotional trauma imposed by the war. Further to this aim it has published a book of oral histories of women who experienced life in the camps, called I Will Always Remember You.4 In addition, in 2008, Women in Black published an anthology of women’s testimonies concerning the war. The book was the result of a cooperative effort among several human rights and women’s groups and recounted their direct testimonies with the aim of ensuring that the perspectives of women affected by the conflict would become an integral part of its history. WIB leaders believed strongly that long-term peace would be served by a thorough accounting of women’s experiences of the war. Notably, the book was supported by organizations outside Serbia and translated into English, suggesting that the NGO sought self-consciously to target an international readership, providing evidence of the group’s ongoing strategy of internationalization and deterritorialization of political claims and alliances.

WIB has been successful in sharing and disseminating knowledge by gathering together different civil society organizations in educational activities aimed at raising awareness of human rights issues and the legacy of war. One example occurred during our visit to Belgrade in
July 2009, when we were invited to attend a conference on Transitional Justice. Participants presented a number of different approaches to the matter of justice for those who lost loved ones to genocide or atrocities during the conflict. Presenters included, among others, Corinna Kumar, founder of the World Courts of Women, and Natasa Kandic, the founder and executive director of the Humanitarian Law Center in Belgrade. Kumar’s and Kandic’s institutions take very different approaches to the issue of justice. While the Courts of Women have no legal ties, are convened by a community’s ‘wise women’ and seek reparation and emotional healing, rather than retribution for crimes, the Humanitarian Law Center in Belgrade has actively collected evidence on war crimes in the former Yugoslavia and strongly advocated for legal investigations and prosecutions of war criminals. The contrast in strategies between these participating groups is arresting, but highlighting their otherwise seemingly disparate efforts was nevertheless surely consonant with WIB’s overarching aim of securing increased salience for its targeted concerns in Serbian society and beyond.

In summary, WIB has actively used the discourse of the liberal peace as it has been formulated by international organizations as well as the political opportunities offered by the changing definition of international security after the beginning of the new millennium. To do so, it has fostered cross-border communication and support networks in its areas of interest, has emphasized a universalistic and individualistic conception of human rights and contributed to a redefinition of politics as nonterritorial. However, as the next section suggests, its advocacy strategies and rhetoric have also remained framed by the very statist discourse it has endeavored to reject, and have been deployed in a very polarized and internationalized political context, a concern to which we now turn.

Political advocacy and paradox amid polarization

While WIB has adopted a strong antistatist and antimilitarist position, it has nonetheless organized how it supports the victims of war crimes according to national identities. The Serbian NGO’s representatives explained to us in interviews that because they are from Serbia they feel compelled to apologize for the crimes of their own government, to support the victims of those atrocities and to make it known that the acts were not undertaken ‘in their name’ (the phrase ‘not in my name’ has been employed by many protesting advocacy NGOs to point up the Serbian government’s original complicity in the Srebrenica massacre). As one group member has observed:

Asking for forgiveness is part of a tradition that is deeply rooted in this area. Yes, it is patriarchal, but we are changing this aspect of the habit. There [in Srebrenica], I am perceived as a member of that nation [Serbia]. They see me as part of a mess that is not individualized, so when I go there as part of that mess, the first thing I must ask for is forgiveness. This is the first contact I have with these women, so the first thing I must ask for is forgiveness (http://advocacynet.org/wordpress-mu/dharati/blog/2009/07/13/srebrenica-and-wib/).

While it is ethically understandable, WIB’s choice mainly to support the victims of the Serbian state ends up reinforcing the formation of identities along ethnic lines, and ironically thereby perpetuates the conflict that it purportedly attempts to mitigate. Our experience in Potocari, the site of the Srebrenica massacre, illustrates this point. It also helps to illuminate the context within which the NGO’s actions are conducted and to illustrate the enduring legacy of the war for the configuration of political and geographic space and people’s identities. In July 2009 we traveled in a group organized by WIB from Belgrade to Potocari to participate in a ceremony remembering the systematic murder of more than 8,000 Muslim men, who were drawn by Radko Mladic’s Serb paramilitary forces from the UN buildings where they had sought refuge. WIB-Belgrade participants were joined by members of WIB-Italy and Spain, staff of the Humanitarian Law Center and representatives of the Swedish organization Kvinna to Kvinna, together with a handful of other activists. The road to Srebrenica is bordered by homes that evidence the shelling and gunfire that befell the area in the war, and by cemeteries, mostly Serb, marked by dark marble Orthodox crosses. These burial grounds vary in size, some amounting only to family plots, while others include hundreds of graves. International aid for reconstruction was also evident. More than 90 per cent of the houses have evidently been recently refurbished or rebuilt.

The site of the commemoration is difficult to describe. The abandoned UN buildings, now used in part for a museum commemorating the victims, are located in an otherwise beautiful high mountain valley along a narrow country road. The grave sites of the massacre’s approximately 3,000 victims who have been identified to date are located across the road from the old UN compound. Identification of remains and burials continue 15 years after the killings. On 11 July 2009, for example, we witnessed the burial of 534 victims identified through ongoing internationally supported forensic investigations.

The cemetery occupies the entire side of a hill, and is situated in a territory that historically had been occupied by a mix of Muslims, Jews and Orthodox Christians, but which was ‘ethnically cleansed’ during the war and is now largely Serb. The wide expanse occupied by...
thousands of white columns that mark the graves of the murdered offers a moving visual reminder of the atrocities that took place nearby. Thousands of Muslims attended the ceremony. Security personnel heavily patrolled the several kilometers-long lines of cars and buses on the way to the burial site. Officials from the EU and the United States, in addition to Islamic religious authorities and local political representatives, were also present. WIB constituted a very visible presence in support of the victims. Organization members, in line with its strategy of relying heavily on performance and symbolic communication to carry out its advocacy, comprised a first line close to the dais, with dozens of WIB representatives dressed in black carrying flowers and signs expressing solidarity for the victims and demanding that the Serb government institute a national day of remembrance of Srebrenica.

Following the ceremony and not long after our departure, our bus stopped at a restaurant along the road, located in the vicinity of a Serb cemetery. At that location our waiter, a young Serb man in his twenties who treated all of us very courteously, asked a question that was in many ways revealing of the potentially problematic unintended consequences of the WIB advocacy strategy and of the internationally supported commemoration effort as a whole. ‘Why’, he asked, ‘don’t you come back tomorrow, when we will commemorate our dead?’ One might dismiss this question as another example of Serb denial of the many atrocities committed during the war. However, while not condoning the stance of denial supported by radical groups in Serbia, we decided to take the waiter’s question seriously and to explore the position and response of representatives of Women in Black to the young man’s query. In fact, while it is indeed the case that the number and way the Muslims were killed by Mladic militias was disproportionately large and vicious, the war also saw a number of Serb victims of Muslim paramilitaries in the area.

Ironically, while rejecting the state as a valid criterion for defining its own identity (‘not in my name’) and by decrying its violent manifestations, WIB-Serbia nonetheless, by choosing to employ belonging to the Serb state as the criterion for selecting which dead are to be supported and legitimized, is perpetuating and reinforcing the identities at play in the conflict. Perversely perhaps, while the moral claim of securing remembrance and justice for these victims that guides the WIB is surely praiseworthy, the political consequences of such choices contradict the central goals of the organization. Because Women in Black seems to have accepted the structure of patriarchy and state power as a valid criterion for deciding between the victims to be supported and the ones to be forgotten, the NGO involuntarily ended up reinforcing the oppositional identities it purported to loathe. Coupled with the large (yet unfortunately only ex post facto) international support for the Muslim victims, WIB’s choice provides Serb nationalistic groups (or constituencies) an opportunity to claim that Serbia is the victim of an international conspiracy. The group’s choice to be present for the Muslim (but not Serb) victims in Srebrenica, while justifiable given the enormity of the atrocity perpetrated by Mladic, nonetheless has served to reinforce Serb feelings of victimization by the local and international community. The choice to apologize only to the victims of the Serbian state has created the unintended consequence of contributing to strengthening the polarized identities revealed by the Yugoslav conflict.

Several of the people we interviewed during our visit pointed to the difficulties implicit in conducting advocacy in a highly polarized situation. For instance, the Country Coordinator for Serbia and Montenegro of Kvinna to Kvinna, Anna Lidstrom, indicated that offering equal support to Serbian victims as well would expose WIB to the risk of being exploited by Serb nationalistic discourses. A WIB intern we met during our visit to Belgrade also expressed this concern. As she has indicated in her blog, two representatives of WIB-Serbia attended the 4 August 2009 commemoration of the Serb victims of Operation Storm in 1995 in Croatia. There, reportedly, the principal speaker used the opportunity to politicize the issue and link it to a call for Kosovo’s independence.

WIB’s choice to support the Serb victims of Croatian forces (while with a much smaller presence than at Srebrenica) as well as its support for RECOM (Regional Fact Finding Commission on the Victims of Wars in Former Yugoslavia), a civil society-based initiative aimed at establishing and maintaining records of all crimes committed during the war that resulted in the break-up of the former Yugoslavia), suggests that WIB is attempting to navigate ways of organizing its advocacy regarding the memorialization of war crimes, between a focus on victims of the Serbian state and a more regionalized and individualistic strategy of commemorating the war deaths. The debate concerning RECOM’s establishment and its potential effects on social reconciliation points up the complexities and conundrums connected with victim advocacy and the memorialization of war crimes in highly polarized political contexts.

The drive to create the Commission has been led by Humanitarian Law Center director, Natasa Kandic, funded by the National Endowment for Democracy and supported by the EU and some 400 additional national and international NGOs. The Commission’s proponents contend that individualization of the memory of crimes would offer a path to reconciliation, on the view that such a process would avoid casting blame on specific nationalities and that ‘telling the truth’ would prevent similar horrors from happening again. Bogdan Ivanisevic, a consultant to the International Center for Transitional
Justice, has neatly articulated this position: ‘As a government and multilateral body, … [RECOM] could be effective. Governments themselves would run the commission and promote it through mutual agreements, thereby reducing the risk of it being demonized. No one could say it was “anti-Serb”, “anti-Albanian”, etc.’ (Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, available from: http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Regions-and-countries/Serbia/Serbia-towards-a-regional-truth-on-war-crimes). RECOM opponents meanwhile maintain that by depoliticizing and relativizing the atrocities committed during the war, the Commission would effectively support the politics of denial embraced by some groups within Serbian society. Thus Sonja Biserko, president of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, has criticized RECOM on the grounds that a regional approach to confronting the past, built on an individualization of crimes, would obscure the fact that the atrocities committed in Bosnia-Herzegovina ‘were not organized in the name of their individual characteristics, but in terms of an imagined Serb group identity’ (Biserko and Becirevic, 2009). For Biserko, a RECOM regional approach would only strengthen the hand of those who deny Serbian responsibility for wartime massacres, and therefore would end up actually impeding genuine reconciliation. In addition, Kandic has noted that while promoting a regional approach to the issue of war crimes is aimed at taming nationalistic representations of the war, the Serbian government’s promised cooperation with the Commission has been carefully parsed, selective in character and organized along nationalistic lines, that is, supportive when the ‘indicted or suspects are non Serb’ (B92 (Serbian Internet, radio and TV station), 21 March 2010).

WIB advocacy on behalf of establishment of a Srebrenica memorial day, coupled with international political pressure, successfully secured the adoption in March 2010 of a resolution by the national Serb parliament condemning the massacre at Srebrenica, apologizing to the families of the victims and calling for cooperation with the ICTY. The Serb resolution also called for other governments in the region to follow suit by recognizing the massacre, apologizing for crimes against Serbs, and public opinion polls concerning the resolution point up the divided political climate. The controversy also exposed the potentially very divisive effects of continuing to organize the process of pacification of society by focusing mainly on the memorialization of the victims. Another example is seen in a 2010 poll conducted by the OSCE and the Belgrade Center for Human Rights, in which responses suggested that 65 per cent of Serbs oppose arresting the commander of the forces responsible for the Srebrenica massacre, Ratko Mladic, and only 25 per cent think he should be taken to The Hague for trial (B92, 17 November 2010).

The debate in the Serbian parliament and in the press concerning the Srebrenica resolution also revealed profound disagreement among NGOs, citizens and parliamentarians regarding what does and does not constitute reconciliation. Natasa Kandic of the Humanitarian Law Center and other activists, including members of the Mothers of Srebrenica, a group strongly supported by WIB, saw the omission of the word ‘genocide’ from the resolution as an indicator of a lack of political will to respect the victims and therefore as an obstacle to reconciliation. But Serb Radical party parliamentary group chief Dragan Todorovic viewed the Srebrenica resolution as yet another example of the demonization of Serbs. As he observed,

Primarily because of the crimes committed against Serbs, those who committed them make declarations, but how can we ask them to make statements about the crimes when, for example, Croatia celebrates operations Storms and Flash, where the biggest ethnic cleansing in Europe was committed after World War II (B92, 1 April 2010).

In this perspective, the most significant obstacle to reconciliation is not insufficient condemnation of the Srebrenica massacre, but a systematic lack of recognition for the suffering of the Serb people, as Liberal Democratic party leader Cedomir Jovanovic emphasized during debate concerning the resolution (B92, 1 April 2010).

The divisive effect of some WIB-Serbia public advocacy was confirmed for us during our visit in 2009 in the context of a silent, peaceful performance we observed staged in Belgrade to demand the institutionalization of a Serbian day of remembrance for Srebrenica and to lay flowers in a public square near the state capital. Members of Obraz, an extremist group whose members displayed large pictures of Mladic and Karadzic, surrounded the vigil site and shouted insults and murder threats at the WIB representatives. Heavily armed Serbian police escorted the WIB group from the organization’s offices to the vigil site and separated the protestors from Obraz members. Apart from the small crowd of angry extremists, passers-by seemed to be largely indifferent to the event. Not many stopped to show support for either group. The upshot of the effort seemed to confirm WIB adherents in their aims while reinforcing Obraz members in theirs.

Public comments on the actions of the NGOs supporting the Srebrenica resolution published in the B92 also illustrate the debate’s discordant political effects. A few examples suggest the character and depth of the divisions at play. One reader’s comment, ‘It is these NGOs that are the voice of consciousness in Serbia and listening to them can only bring about improvements in the
country’, prompted the response: ‘These NGOs are all lavishly financed by NATO-bloc countries and the only voice they speak with is that of their American Masters’ (B92, 12 January 2010). Another reader who observed: ‘The Humanitarian Law Center, Women in Black, Helsinki Human Rights Committee in Serbia, the Center for Improving Legal Studies … these are among the brightest in Serbia, and I thank each and every one of you … someone has to stand in for Serbia’s conscience’, received the response: ‘NGOs are all US/EU sponsored organizations, or some would even call them havens for spies. Then little wonder they are calling for the so called Srebrenica memorial day’. In referring to Natasa Kandic, another commentator noted: ‘The victims should receive justice, all victims. Her problem is that she is too obsessed with non-Serbian victims’ (B92, January 2010).

As these examples indicate, the Serbian debate on political responsibility for the war and its crimes is rendered more complex by the conditionality connected to the process of EU accession and by the strong role of the EU, the US and other international actors in constructing the accepted international narrative or imaginary of the war. The conditions imposed by the EU on Serbia concerning cooperation with the ICTY and its own processes, the strong support of the National Endowment for Democracy for RECOM and the activities of various activist NGOs do in some instances offer fertile soil for those who would interpret Serbia in its recent history as the helpless victim of international pressure and demonization. A poll conducted by the Gallup Balkan Monitor in July 2010 indicated that the percentage of people in Serbia who believed that joining the EU would be good for their country had dropped from 50 per cent to 44 per cent. In that same poll, only 13 per cent of Serbs favored joining NATO, while 52 per cent opposed doing so. In addition, while 64 per cent of the poll’s participants believed that relations with neighbors should be reinforced, 24 per cent perceived that there would be a new round of war. Residents of Croatia, Macedonia and Albania have evidenced a similar decline in enthusiasm for joining the EU in recent polling, while the trend of support for membership among residents of the West Balkan countries and Kosovo is positive (B92, 17 November 2010).

The language used by Serbian president, Boris Tadic, in expressing his support for the Srebrenica resolution, which targeted an international audience while maintaining awareness of local nationalistic sentiments, illustrated the complexity of the political terrain he sought to navigate. On the one hand, Tadic linked parliamentary passage of the resolution to the benefits awaiting the nation with EU access: ‘This resolution’, Tadic declared, ‘speaks clearly on the political values of Serbia and how we see our region, our neighbors and our united European future’ (B92, 31 March 2010). On the other hand, in an apparent bid to quell nationalistic ferment, Tadic added that adoption of the resolution was not the result of international pressure, but an independent choice that reflected Serbian values. Rasim Lalic, Minister of Labor and Social Policy, echoed Tadic’s comments when he noted that Serbia adopted the Srebrenica resolution ‘because of its own interest, and by that the country claimed the right to the place it is entitled to as the leading regional country’ (B92, 31 March 2010).

Conclusions

This article has assessed the work of WIB-Serbia not only with respect to its normative claims, but also with regard to the political consequences those advocacy demands end up producing in the highly internationalized and polarized post-conflict political context in the Balkans. We have argued that the WIB advocacy posture and strategy highlight the increasing internationalization of politics and the connections between radical NGO discourses and what are considered ‘mainstream’ conceptualizations of peace and security produced by international organizations such as the UN and the EU. Women in Black-Serbia has generally been skillful in mobilizing sponsors and activating networks concerning issues it seeks to bring to public attention. WIB’s concern to secure justice for those wronged by the atrocities of the war makes the organization a natural ally of the individualist claims that underpin calls for the liberal peace. We have suggested that in the complex political context of a post-conflict society, this blending of the normative claims of the liberal peace and the internationalization of politics it fosters, together with the organization of victim support along statist lines, has contributed to creating the ironic political effect of reinforcing conflict identities. These effects have been assessed against the complex political space of the Balkans and Serbia in particular. The contested nature of how to create conditions for peace in a polarized post-war political environment is evident in the ambivalent and ambiguous interpretations of the RECOM process, for some a beacon of war, for others that memorial did not go far enough, of the international victimization of Serbs and of the uneven recognition of the crimes committed during the war; for others that memorial did not go far enough, and the fact that the Srebrenica massacre was not called a genocide influenced by the internationalization of politics it fosters, together with the organization of victim support along statist lines, has contributed to creating the ironic political effect of reinforcing conflict identities. These effects have been assessed against the complex political space of the Balkans and Serbia in particular. The contested nature of how to create conditions for peace in a polarized post-war political environment is evident in the ambivalent and ambiguous interpretations of the RECOM process, for some a beacon of war, for others that memorial did not go far enough, and the fact that the Srebrenica massacre was not called a genocide represented yet another example of Serbian national denial of responsibility for the killings. Regardless of these different positions, the continuous focus on the horrors of the war, fostered by the internationally

supported effort in which WIB takes active part with its own claims oscillating between the liberal peace and a nationalistic stance, may end up fossilizing identities along the lines of victims/perpetrators (regardless of who may claim either role), and offering room for exploitation of advocacy initiatives by radical warmongering groups.

In summary, in a heavily internationalized political space which includes multiple stakeholders (the UN, the EU, NATO, NGOs as well as national politicians and populations), the effects of normative claims regarding justice and guilt, especially when the latter is framed along the lines of national identities, combined with the focus of advocacy for peace around the memorialization of war atrocities, need to be carefully assessed. In the absence of more comprehensive ways of fostering alternative identities and political imaginaries, assuming that the recounting of suffering and the counting of the deaths will lead to a more peaceful society is just too simplistic. The expansion of what is considered the legitimate space for governance beyond state borders, the multiplication of stakeholders that claim legitimacy in political processes and the hybridization of their identities between local and transnational, add elements of complexity to the assessment of the political effects of advocacy claims which, while resonating with the accepted consensus of the liberal peace, may result in unintended consequences when they arrogate for themselves universal validity in a polarized political space. This article has explored these complexities and sought to provide a more nuanced analysis of NGOs, and thereby help to develop more effective international strategies for building peace.

Notes

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1. This article resulted from a broader book project that explores three different NGOs, operating in different contexts with different strategies of action. It maps the range of their relationships with other primary stakeholders and analyzes the intended and unintended consequences of their actions for building peace in post-conflict situations or scenarios. In addition to WIB, an advocacy organization, our broader research addresses a health and development civil society organization and a community-based philanthropy. These are Zanmi Lasante (the Haitian branch of Partners In Health), an organization engaged in a wide array of activities in its areas of interest which aim not only at improved health outcomes for the Haitian population, but also partly at building effective government and social institutions; and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, a community-based philanthropy that has involved international partners, community members and other philanthropies as it has sought to encourage and to fund an array of grass-roots reconciliation efforts in the constituencies it serves.

2. A thorough discussion of identities formation in the Balkans is beyond the scope of this article. For a critical discussion of the western representation of the Balkans as coded along nationalistic lines, and for a study of the competing ideologies that have contributed to forming identities, see Pavlos Hatzopoulos (2008). For a different analytical perspective on Serb identity and pan-Yugoslavism see Marko Bulatovic, (2004). Here we embrace Hatzopoulos’ invitation to look at the Balkans as a political space undergoing complex transformations. By analyzing the effects of political claims in context, we seek to avoid essentializing the identities in play.

3. Interview with Sasha Kovacevic, Belgrade, WIB office, 8 July 2009.
4. Interview with Sasha Kovacevic, Belgrade, WIB office, 8 July 2009.
5. See United Nations, 1999; chilling footage on the Srebrenica massacre, mostly recorded by Mladic paramilitary force members, is available on YouTube, as are several other short films detailing the tragic events; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c95ixE_01Q8 [Accessed 2 June 2010].
6. The United States ambassador, Charles English as well as United States Congressman Michael Turner, from Dayton, Ohio, and his wife participated in the commemoration.
7. Interview with the authors, Belgrade, July 2009.
8. In 1995 the Croatian government army recovered part of the territory lost to the Krajina Serbs, who had previously declared independence from Croatia, through two military operations: ‘Flash’ which regained Western Slavonia in May and ‘Storm’ which regained the areas known as UN Sectors North and South in August. In the process, although exact figures are still disputed, best estimates suggest that around 2,000 Serbs were killed, and an estimated 1,200 of those were civilians. Approximately 20,000 Serb-owned homes in Croatia were burned (as reported by Donna Harari; http://advocacynet.org/wordpress-mu/dharati/ [Accessed 4 June 2010]). In Croatia 4 August is celebrated as the ‘Day of Gratitude to the Homeland Defenders’.

References

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