Politics cannot be based on a myth

*Latinka Perovic*

First of all, I wish to give the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia full credit for never throwing in the towel — throughout the conflicts between Serbs and Albanians, Serbs and Croats, and Serbs and Muslims — in its endeavor, with which I have been closely related, to establish and maintain dialogue with people of common sense and goodwill coming from all these nations. Today, we can assert that that has been an enterprise for the future, a work aimed at creating at least a minimal space for bringing together political representatives of warring parties once arms are put down and brutal violence against civilians and their properties comes to an end.

A dialogue indicates a certain state of affairs, even when it tends to be reserved, deliberately superficial so as to avoid painful topics, marked by scanty argumentation or deliberately channeled so as not to make things worse. That is why dialogue is always welcome.

As planned by the organizers, I am supposed to present some theses about the possibility of a historical agreement between the Albanians and the Serbs. As a historian with long experience in and knowledge of the empiricism of Albanian-Serb political relations in the late 20th century, I am not allowed to turn a blind eye to the view which states that ‘developments in Kosovo are almost impossible to consider unless tackled in a wider context’ This means, among other things, that I should take into account scholarly findings — particularly those dealing with historiography and ethnology — from all over the world and compare them with those attained in Serbia and in Kosovo. However, within this time frame, I must take them as they stand rather than to elaborate them, and try just to summarize the prerequisites to a viable historical agreement between the Albanians and the Serbs. Listening to young Albin Kurti yesterday, I knew I would have to take such an approach.

1. I take it that turning a new chapter and leaving the past behind is simply impossible. We might agree that we shared a complex past, but probably not on the zero hour form when it should be measured. However, it is obvious that we must focus on the period that we refer to as the recent past. We have lived through that recent past: we have been accomplices in its development and are responsible for it. We might describe the consequences of the recent past in the first place. But this is the time for raising the necessary question about actual developments and causes.

No natural disaster has brought about the collapse of ex-Yugoslavia,

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disintegrating in a series of wars or in the longest of the ten wars which Serbia had waged over the past two centuries once the cold war ended along with the bipolar world. On the contrary, it was the launch of the Greater Serbia project, almost unanimously supported by Serbian society, that generated the war. The project has, in its own way, interpreted the historical era between the 20th and the 21st centuries. While the belief that radically changed international circumstances would spur economic and political changes in East European countries, and Yugoslavia in particular, prevailed in the international community — whatever this syntagma means — historical backsliding to the 19th century goal to have all Serbs united in a single state won the upper hand in Serbian society. Actually, it was those changed international circumstances — the supposition that the post-cold war international community would not intervene in internal affairs and divisions — that the official Serbia counted on, while proclaiming the annulment of Yugoslavia’s confederal system and the Republic of Serbia’s unfinished federal arrangement with constituent provinces, along with the undefined status of Serbia proper, as its goal. When the republics’ constitutionally guaranteed self-determination put an end to the process of Yugoslavia’s ‘Serbization,’ the official Belgrade shifted to the program of rounding off the Serbian state within its ethnic borders.

It was the goal that determined the means. Planned, organized and systematic ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and genocide were backed by the powerful military — shifting from multiethnic to purely Serbian — and by scores of paramilitary troops. The close of the 20th century witnessed a boost in the technology of killing that culminated in the siege of Sarajevo, the destruction of Vukovar, Srebrenica and refrigerator trucks in Kosovo. Therefore, the first and foremost prerequisite to any historical agreement — not only with the Albanians, but also with all other people sharing the history of ex-Yugoslavia — is condemnation of this technology of death — in other words, acknowledging the defeat of the Greater Serbia project that generated wars and a civilizational downfall affecting all nations in the region. The break up of this project is even more important since the process of the dissolution of ex-Yugoslav has not yet come to an end. Claims that are still being voiced — particularly after Serbia’s reformist premier was gunned down — to have Serbia compensated for the defeat of its archaic project by annulling Montenegro’s sovereignty and negating Kosovo’s factual independence probably best testify to this.

2. Further, realistic perceptions concerning one’s own position preconditions the possibility of a historical agreement between the Albanians and the Serbs. It is only natural that I will be speaking about Serbia here. There is a huge discrepancy between the real state of affairs in the country whose demographic area which is has dwindled over the past wars, that has been impoverished, and economically and technologically lagging behind, while its society — offering no prospects to younger generations — is not only tired and anomic, but also deprived of several hundreds of young and educated people, and the territorial aspirations of its politicians who, therefore, have always been distrustful and cautious.