

JUSTICE FOR TUZLA YOUTH - IS IT POSSIBLE?

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Abstract

Achieving justice in post-conflict societies represents a fundamental and complex challenge, particularly when state mechanisms fail in their primary duty to protect citizens from systemic war crimes, thereby irrevocably rupturing the established social contract. This paper examines the theoretical and practical limitations of transitional justice in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) following the 1992–1995 armed conflict. The central dilemma addresses whether "absolute justice" a utopian concept aiming to completely erase the trauma and consequences of mass atrocities—is achievable, or if victims and a fractured society must pursue a flawed but attainable alternative. Utilizing a critical qualitative approach, this research thoroughly analyzes the May 25, 1995, Tuzla Gate (Tuzlanska kapija) massacre, wherein an artillery shell fired by the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) killed 71 young civilians and injured over 100. The analysis evaluates the efficacy of post-conflict judicial and social responses, specifically focusing on the trial of VRS commander Novak Đukić.

The findings clearly demonstrate that retributive criminal justice, while fundamentally necessary for establishing historical truth, is drastically insufficient on its own. The Đukić case illustrates severe systemic deficits: the limitation of legal prosecution to a single individual rather than the comprehensive chain of command, the evasion of penal execution due to the convicted perpetrator's flight to Serbia, and the persistent proliferation of aggressive revisionist campaigns that continuously deny judicially established facts. Furthermore, the manuscript identifies critical structural failures across other transitional justice pillars. State reparations remain deeply discriminatory and inherently fragmented along regional and ethnic lines, truth-seeking is paralyzed by segregated educational narratives, and institutional reforms have failed to dismantle the ethno-political divisions that originally fueled the conflict.

The study ultimately concludes that demanding "absolute justice"—which seeks to undo the irreversible damage of mass crimes—is an unattainable illusion that inevitably leads to cynicism and social paralysis. Instead, post-conflict societies must dedicate themselves to

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"possible justice," a multidimensional mosaic comprising rigorous criminal accountability, inclusive memorialization, equitable material compensation, and deep institutional restructuring designed to uproot ethno-nationalist ideologies. This synergy of imperfect mechanisms provides the only realistic framework to restore victim dignity, counteract historical denial, and guarantee the non-repetition of violence in deeply divided societies.

Keywords: transitional justice, Tuzla Gate, Bosnia and Herzegovina, justice, war crimes

1. Introduction

This work confronts one of the most difficult, thankless and demanding tasks, but one that is of essential value for any post-conflict society. This task encompasses the fundamental question: how to achieve justice for victims of war crimes who have already been exposed to the ultimate injustice? An injustice that they did not cause, nor could they have avoided. An injustice that, according to all the postulates of the social contract, was supposed to be prevented by the very society in which they joined with others, believing in its protective role. However, this question goes beyond individual destiny and inevitably spills over to the collective. It is not just about what to do with a society that has failed in its primary function, but also about a more fundamental dilemma: does society itself, as such, have a right to justice, or is it exclusively the individual right of its suffering members?

However, this analysis must go a step further, asking a difficult but necessary question: is absolute justice in a post-conflict society, wounded and imbued with trauma, even possible? And, if not, what is left for the victims and society itself? Should they give up on this quest and come to terms with the bitter reality, or is it necessary to search for new, perhaps imperfect, but achievable paths to justice? Is such a possibility, rather than absolute justice, still justice at all? Does it satisfy the essential needs of victims? These are questions that every post-conflict society, but unfortunately, also every individual victim, must ask themselves.

First, it is necessary to deconstruct the very concept of "justice" in this context. In stable, peaceful societies, justice is often identified with retributive justice - punishment for the perpetrator. Criminal prosecution and conviction represent the foundation, a clear act by which society confirms its moral norms and provides satisfaction to the victim by punishing the one who caused her harm. In post-conflict realities, this model, although necessary, proves to be drastically insufficient. What does it mean to convict one or a hundred perpetrators, when the crimes were systemic, when thousands of people participated in them, and the entire social and political infrastructure was harnessed to their perpetration? Here, criminal justice, no matter how important it is for establishing the facts and individual responsibility, cannot heal either the victim or society on its own.

This is where other, complementary forms of justice come into play. Restorative justice, for example, shifts the focus from punishing the offender to repairing the harm caused (Moffett, 2026). It asks: what do victims need to regain their dignity and sense of security?

The answers are complex and multi-layered. This can be material reparation for destroyed property, but also symbolic, such as a public and unequivocal recognition of the crime by the state or the community from which the perpetrators originate. It is right to the truth - to know the full extent of the crime, the locations of mass graves, the fate of the missing. It is the right to memory, to memorials that will not be the subject of political fights, but dignified places of commemoration. Without these elements, the court's judgment against a general or soldier remains an isolated legal act, not the beginning of social healing.

On the other hand, a society that has allowed or even organized mass crimes against part of its members is not just a passive observer; it itself is deeply diseased. Its fabric is torn apart, its trust destroyed, and its moral compass lost. Therefore, "justice for society" is not an abstract right, but an existential need for healing. This treatment implies deep institutional reforms (reform of the security and judicial sectors above all) to ensure that the mechanisms that made crime possible are dismantled. This implies a reform of the education system, so that future generations learn about the past based on facts, not nationalist myths. Justice for society, therefore, is its obligation to transform itself and become a safe home again for all its members, not just for those who belong to the "winning" or majority group.

In this complex relationship, the most painful conclusion is reached: absolute justice, in which every crime is punished, every victim is compensated and every injustice is corrected, remains an unattainable ideal. Faced with this truth, society has two choices: cynicism and giving up or accepting other ways of "possible justice". Giving up means surrendering to oblivion, denial and, ultimately, the risk of repeating the conflict. The search for "possible justice", on the other hand, represents the difficult path of building a mosaic. That mosaic consists of pieces - some court verdicts, reparations programs, establishment of truth commissions, public apologies, joint commemorations. Each piece is imperfect and insufficient on its own. But together, they can create an image that, although it does not erase the scars, provides recognition, builds the foundations for coexistence and sends the message that, although the crime happened, it is not and will not be forgotten or accepted as the norm. Such "possible justice" may not bring "perfect" peace to the victims, but it restores their dignity and acknowledges their suffering, while giving society a chance for moral renewal and a different future.

2. Justice for victims of war crimes

The definition of the term “justice” implies a dual meaning. On the one hand, it denotes a social state in which there is no discrimination against members of society, but they enjoy their rights unhindered and without restrictions (Britannica, 2026). On the other hand, if such a state happens to be violated, justice would imply a return to a state that eliminates the imbalance (injustice), so that society and its members continue to live with the elimination of such a compromising state.

When justice defined in this way is viewed through the prism of war crimes committed in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992-1995 and their victims, two lines of conclusion clearly emerge. First, society has clearly failed to create social conditions in which all its members will be equal and will not be discriminated against, and their rights violated. The reasons for this are known. The war that lasted in BiH for four years destroyed social mechanisms of protection, and the guiding ideas of war policies were discriminatory in themselves, resulting in genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and systematically prepared and committed crimes. The expected result of such crimes was precisely discriminatory, with the clear aim of achieving social goals based on discrimination against a certain part of society and its citizens.

Since the first is irrefutably established by almost 1,000 judgments of competent courts (War Crimes Trials Database), the second question is answered almost by itself in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The crimes that were committed in BiH during the past war did not only destroy the lives and bodies of people and their material possessions. They destroyed the social fabric that connected its members, as well as the institutions they created to make that society function on a just basis. Divided along several lines (ethnic, territorial), the post-war Bosnian society can hardly correct the injustices it created during the war. If for no other reason, it is due to the fact that the enemies of yesterday, even after the signing of the "peace agreement" in 1995, remained so, using all social resources to continue waging war far after the formal end of the war.

In all this, finding and giving justice to the victims of war crimes seems more like a utopia and an impossible social mission. A mission that may be a utopia for society, but for the victims it is a matter of vital importance.

The issue of justice for victims is therefore not one-dimensional and cannot be reduced solely to the judicial prosecution of perpetrators of war crimes. Although criminal

justice is a fundamental pillar, it is only one part of a much broader and more complex mechanism known as transitional justice. This concept includes four key elements: prosecution (criminal justice), reparations (compensation), the search for truth, and institutional reforms that guarantee that crimes will not be repeated. In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, each of these pillars faces enormous obstacles stemming from the very structure of post-Dayton Bosnian society (Mertus, 2007).

Although the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and domestic courts have convicted a significant number of individuals, thus formally satisfying part of criminal justice, the actual social impact of these judgments remains limited (Clark, 2014). Instead of judgments being the basis for collective confrontation with the past, they have become a weapon in the continuation of the ethno-political conflict. Convicted war criminals are often celebrated as heroes in their communities, their murals decorate public areas, and political leaders openly deny the court facts, including the adjudged genocide. In this way, justice is annulled on a symbolic level, and the victims are traumatized and humiliated anew, because it turns out that their suffering was a legitimate act in the eyes of part of society (Nettelfield, 2010).

In the part that refers to reparations, i.e. compensation of victims, the full depth of systemic discrimination in BiH is shown. Bosnia and Herzegovina has never adopted a single state law on the rights of victims of war torture, so their status and rights depend on their place of residence (entity or canton) and often on their ethnicity. In this way, the state, which was supposed to correct the injustice, itself continues it, creating a hierarchy of victims where some are recognized and taken care of, while others remain invisible and disenfranchised. Material compensation is insufficient, and psychological and social support are fragmented and left to the enthusiasm of the non-governmental sector, instead of being part of the systemic care of the state and society.

The search for the truth turned into a "war of memories". Instead of one, based on facts and court rulings, three parallel and mutually exclusive "truths" coexist in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or rather, interpretations of the truth. Educational systems are ethnically segregated, and children are taught narratives in which "our" side is exclusively the victim and "theirs" exclusively the aggressor. There is no common day of remembrance, there are no common places of commemoration. The fight for the truth is thus reduced to a fight for memorials, for the right to remember, where erecting a monument to one group of victims is

often perceived by the other side as a provocation. Without consensus on the basic facts of the past, it is impossible to build trust and reconciliation (Šimić, 2024).

Finally, institutional reforms, which should ensure that crimes do not recur, have remained largely superficial. The security and justice sectors have been reformed, but the political system, based on the ethnic division of power and territory, remains a generator of the same tensions that led to the war. Institutions are weak and captured by ethno-national interests, unable to protect the rights of the individual over the collective.

Therefore, returning to a "state of equilibrium", as stated at the beginning, for Bosnia and Herzegovina is not only a question of correcting past injustices, but also of dismantling the system that keeps those injustices alive in the present. For victims, justice is not an abstract ideal; it is a concrete recognition of their suffering, punishment for the perpetrators, material security, the right to remember and, above all, the guarantee that their children will not suffer the same fate. If society and its political elites consider this mission a utopia, real and lasting peace will remain elusive.

3. Crime at the Tuzlanska kapija (Tuzla Gate)

The crime at the Tuzla Gate is one of the most serious war crimes committed in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the armed conflict from 1992 to 1995, and this sad epithet is not easy to bear in a country where thousands of war crimes were committed. A country where hundreds of people have been convicted of the most serious and heinous war crimes. In a country where all war crimes from the catalog of international law, including genocide, were committed. However, the war crime against the civilian population at the Tuzla Gate stands out for its bestiality, consequences and intent to kill and injure not only those who represent the present of a country but also its future. Although this crime killed 71 people and more than 100 were seriously or slightly wounded, it is not difficult to make an overview of the judicial practice for this crime because in Bosnia and Herzegovina, before all its courts, only one case against only one person was conducted and concluded (Case of the Court of BiH against the Đukić Novak, S1 1 K 015222 14 Krž.). In that case, the accused Đukić Novak was found guilty in a trial held before the court of Bosnia and Herzegovina and sentenced to 20 years in prison. He never served that sentence, because he fled to Serbia before he started serving his sentence.

To understand the full gravity of this crime, it is necessary to go back to May 25, 1995. That date, once celebrated as Youth Day in the former Yugoslavia, was just another day

of apparent respite in Tuzla in a city that had been declared a United Nations protected zone. This status gave citizens, especially young people, a false sense of security. Kapija, a small square in the city center, was a traditional gathering place, a promenade where love was born and friendships were made. On that warm spring evening, the square was filled with hundreds of young people, children and teenagers who, despite the war, were trying to live a semblance of normal life. At 8:55 p.m., that illusion of normality was shattered by a deafening explosion. A grenade fired from the position of the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) on Mount Ozren, some 27 kilometers away, fell directly into the hearts of the gathered youth. The consequences were horrific. 71 people died on the spot and in the days that followed. The average age of those killed was barely 23, and the youngest victim, Sandro Kalesić, was only two and a half years old. More than a hundred wounded bear permanent physical and psychological scars. It was a targeted attack, not on a military target, but on the civilian population, on the future of a city, carried out with the clear intention of terrorizing and killing.

The investigation began immediately, but only years later, with the establishment of the Prosecutor's Office and the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the conditions for the prosecution of this crime were created. The indictment was brought against Novak Đukić, at that time VRS general and commander of Tactical Group "Ozren", whose area of responsibility included the artillery positions from which the grenade was fired. The court proceedings that followed were thorough. The prosecution presented a series of evidence, including the testimonies of survivors, material evidence from the scene, and key expert reports from ballistics and military experts. Ballistics expert Berko Zečević, through a precise analysis of craters and tracks on the ground, was able to reconstruct the trajectory of the projectile and determine with almost absolute certainty that the 130 mm caliber shell was fired from the VRS position in the village of Panjik in Ozren. Military experts, analyzing the command structure of the VRS, unequivocally determined that the unit that fired the grenade was under the direct command of the accused Đukić, and that such an attack could not have been carried out without his order or approval.

But even though this case has been legally concluded, it is still necessary to emphasize some illogicalities.

First, related to the sentence to which the accused was sentenced. When observed at the first-instance verdict, it is evident that he was sentenced according to the provisions of

the BiH Criminal Code, article 173., to a long-term prison sentence of 25 years (the maximum sentence according to this law is 45 years in prison), which, although serious, qualifies this crime in the milder segment of the most serious crimes (the range is 21-45 years in prison). In the appeal procedure, however, the court applied the Criminal Code of the SFRY, article 142., and reduced the sentence to 20 years in prison. Although this appears to be a reduced sentence, it is the maximum sentence that could be imposed under that law. It remains an open question, although it is legally easily explainable, how the first-instance panel characterized this offense as "milder" and determined a punishment for it in the lower segment of punishment, while the appeals panel determined this punishment as the maximum and thus, indirectly, took the position that this offense is the most serious possible. This legal entanglement resulted from the decision of the European Court of Human Rights in the case "Maktouf and Damjanović v. Bosnia and Herzegovina", which established that the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot retroactively apply the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2003 for crimes committed during the war, but a milder law that was in force at the time of the commission must be applied - the Criminal Code of the SFRY (Applications no. 2312/08 and 34179/08). While the first-instance panel, judging by the length of the sentence (25 years), considered the crime at Kapija to be serious, but not the most serious, the second-instance panel, by imposing a maximum of 20 years under the old law, sent a message that within the framework of that law, the crime had reached the absolute peak of seriousness. Paradoxically, although the punishment was numerically reduced, its symbolic and legal qualification became more difficult.

Another issue worth considering is how everything remained on only one indictment against one person. Without going into the independence of the prosecutor's work, some things are not logical. Namely, during the trial of Novak Đukić, evidence was clearly presented (and accepted by the court) indicating that several persons participated in the commission of this criminal act. Moreover, they are clearly marked. However, even decades later, not a single other indictment was brought, reducing this crime to the work of one man, which absolutely does not correspond to the truth, nor to the facts already established in the court proceedings. Novak Đukić, as commander of the tactical group, was a key, but not the only, link in the chain of command. Below him were the commanders of the artillery units, and at the very end the artillery crew who physically loaded the cannon, aimed and fired the deadly grenade. Above him were his superiors in the First Krajina Corps of the VRS, up to

the Main Staff and the Supreme Commander. The shelling of Tuzla was not an isolated incident, but part of a wider military strategy of terrorizing the civilian population in UN protected zones, identical to the one used in Sarajevo, Bihać and other cities. Reducing responsibility to one man is a dangerous relativization that obscures the systemic nature of the crime and absolves all other participants in the chain of command, from those who issued the orders to those who unquestioningly executed them, but also those who did nothing to punish those who committed this crime. Why the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina never expanded the investigation remains a painful question for the families of victims and survivors.

The peak of the defeat of justice in this case happened after the verdict became final. Taking advantage of the procedural loophole created after the aforementioned decision of the European Court, Đukić was released pending a new decision on the amount of the sentence. He used that moment to flee to Serbia, whose citizenship he also holds. From that moment, the final judgment of the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina becomes a dead letter. Serbia, citing the constitutional ban on extradition of its citizens, refuses to extradite him to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although a protocol on cooperation in the prosecution of war crimes was signed between the two countries, which enables execution of the sentence, the Serbian judiciary initiated a process that turned into a farce. For years, the hearings have been postponed due to Đukić's "allegedly" bad health, and the whole process acts as a deliberate delay with the goal of the convict never serving his sentence.

In parallel with the obstruction of the execution of the sentence, an aggressive media and political campaign to deny the crime was launched from Serbia and Republika Srpska. So-called "expert teams" were established, which put forward alternative theories, claiming that the explosion at the Gate was caused by a planted bomb, not an artillery shell. These revisionist theses, although completely rejected and exposed as unfounded during the court proceedings, are continuously promoted in public space, causing additional pain to the survivors and the families of the victims. The goal of this campaign is not to establish the truth, but to create confusion, relativize judicially established facts and finally, political and moral amnesty of the perpetrators. The crime at the Tuzla Gate thus becomes a case study of the limits and defeats of transitional justice in a post-conflict society: from one verdict for the massacre of 71 people, to the unprocessed chain of command, unexecuted punishment and

finally, to the aggressive denial of the crime itself. Justice for the victims of the Gate was not only partially served - but it was also, ultimately, cheated.

4. Justice for the youth of Tuzla

After the end of every war, the victims cry out for justice. However, usually they themselves are not sure, except that they want it, what it would be. Regardless of that, the same question is asked every time: "Then how to achieve justice for the victims of such crimes", and it would be fair to extend that question to two more questions. The first would be: "Can it be realized as such", while the second would read: "Is it possible at all". Is it possible to find and achieve justice for those who were killed, tortured, abused and injured? Is it possible to achieve justice for those left behind? Is it possible to achieve justice for a society whose members are injured and thus indirectly damage the society itself, which as a result suffers as a whole? If so, who will achieve that justice and how? If not, then what?

To break all this down, it is necessary to analyze each of the possibilities.

First, the realization of absolute justice for individuals and society. Such a way of realizing justice would imply that it is possible to take measures and activities that can erase the consequences of the crime at the Tuzla Gate, and to grant all the victims (individuals and society) justice that will completely remove the injustice inflicted on them and return their lives to the level they were before the event that caused them this injustice. Bearing in mind the circumstances of the event in question and its consequences, it is obvious that such justice cannot be achieved. Neither on an individual nor on a collective level, it is possible to take measures that would bring the murdered back to life, nor is it possible to return body parts or souls to those who lost them in this act. It has been medically proven that it is impossible to erase their trauma. Likewise, it is not possible to erase the traumas of all those who were present at that event, as well as the parents, friends and the entire society to which the victims belonged. Finally, it is not possible to erase such an event or its consequences from individual or collective memory. Therefore, it is justified to conclude, unfortunately, that absolute justice for the victims of the Tuzla Gate (and all those who are individually or collectively) connected with this crime cannot be achieved.

When this is so, should victims and society give up the search for another, more imperfect (but possible) justice?

The answer to this question is a resounding no, they don't. Victims need to demand and receive justice for what happened to them, no matter how imperfect it may be. It

is worth analyzing what kind of justice is possible for them and society, drawing on (but not limited to) the available mechanisms of transitional justice (Barria & Roper, 2010).

Criminal justice, as the most dominant form of transitional justice mechanisms, is an indispensable and essential part of any post-conflict society. Its goal would be to conduct trials for committed crimes, determine the individual responsibility of the accused persons, determine the facts and qualify and call their actions by their right name. Sometimes, although exceptionally, these courts will also award some form of compensation for the victims. In the specific case of the Tuzla Gate victims, the value of this approach is indispensable. Although it does not have the possibility to remove the consequences of the act, the court in every society has the authority that no other body has, which is to make a final and binding decision regarding some event in life. In this sense, the court's decisions on responsibility for this crime, its legal (and human) qualification, and the irrefutably established facts about the event, represent the starting point for any conversation about justice for the victims.

The next point are the mechanisms that deal with telling the truth and the culture of remembrance. They aim to speak about established facts, but also to supplement them (without assuming the role of courts) with less strict forms (art, etc.), so that facts about events are transmitted in society and reach the widest number of its members. Lasting peace and mutual understanding and respect for yesterday's enemies cannot be built on lies and deception, but only on the truth (established facts), no matter how bitter and painful they may be for its members (Šimić, 2025). As a continuation of that process, commemorations and the marking of the place of suffering are logically imposed. In the specific case of the Tuzla Gate victims, it is necessary that the established facts reach the widest possible number of people to get to know them and witness the severity of that suffering. As people usually don't read court judgments in large numbers, these facts are easier to make available in any society through the media, documentaries, art or the education system (Šimić, 2025). In this way, people will be able to remember and build a future in which such unworthy acts will not be committed. And this will not be the case only on an individual basis. On the contrary, in this way, society itself will be able to participate in achieving justice for itself as a collectivity to which the individual victims belonged, and which undoubtedly suffered enormous loss and damage itself through the suffering of its members (Zupan, 2006).

The question of whether killing and violence cause any harm to people and their property is, of course, only a rhetorical question. The tragic events at the Tuzla Gate caused enormous damage, both on an individual and collective level. On an individual level, 71 lives were lost, but the consequences were not only for those people whose lives were lost. They were also for their loved ones. Parents, spouses, children. They were also for all those who knew them, but also for all members of society who cannot remain silent in the face of such injustice. And while life cannot be replaced, something can still be done. Those who were killed can be remembered. Their suffering can be commemorated. Monuments can be erected for them. Those left behind can and must be helped to continue their lives in the best possible way. Society too often speaks of justice as some abstract, disembodied creation, but for victims of crime it is very concrete and materialized. Those left behind by the murdered are traumatized. Spouses are left without loved ones. Children without parents. A society without its present and future. They all have specific needs, which are not met by sending one general to prison. This is something that the divided and often insensitive Bosnian society should always keep in mind when, if at all, it remembers the victims of war crimes and the consequences that these acts caused.

Finally, society should implement reforms that will remove from social reality those (people and politicians) who led to tragic events, and who, ironically in the fate of Bosnia and Herzegovina, decide in peace precisely about justice for the victims of war crimes, including those at the Tuzla Gate.

5. Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper confronted one of the most difficult and painful questions facing any post-conflict society: how to achieve justice for the victims of war crimes in a world already defined by ultimate injustice? Starting from a philosophical dilemma, through a concrete analysis of the Bosnian context, and all the way to the case study of the Tuzla Gate massacre, one central, albeit deeply disturbing, conclusion crystallizes: absolute justice, the one that would completely cancel the crime and return the world to the state before it, is a tragic and unattainable illusion. Acknowledging this fact is not an invitation to cynicism or giving up. On the contrary, it is the necessary first step towards the only true and morally correct alternative – a dedicated, comprehensive and constant search for possible justice.

The text has consistently and argumentatively shown why the ideal of absolute justice is unattainable. No trial can bring back to life the 71 people killed at the Gate; no material compensation can erase the trauma of the survivors, restore lost limbs, or fill the void in the hearts of parents, children, and friends. The social contract, fundamentally broken now when the state failed to protect its citizens, cannot be retroactively "repaired." The injustice of mass crime creates a scar on the individual soul and the collective fabric of society that is indelible. Insisting on absolute justice is therefore not only unrealistic, but also dangerous, because it sets a bar that can never be reached, which inevitably leads to frustration, hopelessness, and ultimately, to giving up any search for responsibility.

It is at this point, faced with the painful truth of irreparability, that society finds itself at a crossroads. One path leads to nihilism, oblivion and denial - a path which, as the experience of Bosnia and Herzegovina shows, is only a continuation of war by other means and a sure recipe for future conflicts. The second path, the one that this paper advocates, is the path of accepting imperfection and building a "mosaic of possible justice". This mosaic is no less valuable; it is the only realistic and humane response to the evil committed. Its strength lies not in the perfection of individual parts, but in their synergy and comprehensiveness.

The first and indispensable part of that mosaic is criminal justice. Its role, as shown, goes beyond mere punishment. In societies poisoned by propaganda and the "War of memory", court verdicts, based on evidence and testimony, become the anchor of truth. The sentence against Novak Đukić for the crime at Tuzla Gate, although tragically not carried out, represents an undeniable fact that serves as a barrier against aggressive revisionism and false narratives. However, the case of Tuzla Gate also serves as a dark warning about the limits of this mechanism. Reducing the systemic crime to the responsibility of one man, not prosecuting the entire chain of command, and the eventual escape of the convicted and the obstruction of the execution of the sentence, show that even this basic pillar of justice can be fatally undermined by a lack of political will and regional cooperation.

Because of these limitations, the second part of the mosaic – the search for truth and the construction of a culture of remembrance – becomes crucial. Judicial truth, often technical and inaccessible to the public, must be translated into collective consciousness. This is achieved through the work of the media, documentaries, art, commemorations and, most importantly, through the education system. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where three

conflicting “truths” coexist, this process is blocked. Instead of confronting the facts, there are segregated narratives that deepen mistrust. The fight for truth becomes a fight for memorials, and the memory of victims is instrumentalized for political purposes. Without a consensus on the basic facts of the past, genuine reconciliation remains elusive, and society remains trapped in cycles of mutual accusation.

The third, often most neglected, piece of the mosaic are reparations. It needs to be emphasized again that justice for victims is not an abstract ideal, but a very concrete and materialized need. While society is preoccupied with high politics and legal formulations, survivors and victims' families live with the real consequences: destroyed health, permanent trauma, and loss of breadwinner. The state's systemic care through material and symbolic compensation is not an act of mercy, but an acknowledgment of responsibility and the most direct way to restore dignity to victims. The fragmented and discriminatory approach to reparations in BiH, where victims' rights depend on place of residence and ethnicity, represents a second, post-war injustice that the state inflicts on those it has already failed once.

Finally, the fourth part of the mosaic turns its gaze towards the future – institutional reforms as a guarantee of non-repetition. Justice is not complete unless it is ensured that the mechanisms that made the crime possible are dismantled. This implies profound changes in the political, security and educational system. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the ethno-political structure resulting from the "peace agreement" maintains the tensions that led to the war, this segment of justice was almost completely absent. Institutions remain weak and trapped, unable to protect the individual, and society remains vulnerable to the same ideologies that once destroyed them.

Ultimately, the story of justice for victims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, perfectly summed up in the tragedy of the Tuzla Gate, is a story of a profound gap between what is necessary and what has been achieved. It is a story of an unfinished mission. The conclusion of this paper is therefore neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but realistic and a call to action. It argues that giving up on the search for justice is not an option. Instead, it is necessary to work with renewed energy and perseverance on building each individual piece of this complex mosaic. Every trial that is concluded, every fact that enters school textbooks, every victim support program, and every reform that strengthens the rule of law represents a small victory over the forces of destruction. This "possible justice", composed of thousands of such small

victories, may never bring final peace to the souls of the victims, but it is the only one that can offer hope to the living and give society a chance to morally renew itself and build a future worthy of the memory of those who are no longer there. It is a difficult, long, and often thankless path, but it is the only path that leads from the darkness of the past to the possibility of a shared future.

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