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## The Scholars' Initiative

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## The Scholars' Initiative

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The Scholars' Initiative addresses the need to break the cycle of nationalist discourse that perpetuates divisions between ethnic groups by (1) creating a common narrative that discredits proprietary myths, while validating "inconvenient facts" that must be acknowledged before mutual recognition and reconciliation can begin, and (2) enlisting regional media and political leaders to acknowledge (and hopefully endorse) the existence of a common account co-authored by their own scholars.

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### The Problem

Two decades have now passed since the peoples of central and Eastern Europe emerged from a half-century of Communism. Like so many other countries around the globe that have thrown off authoritarian regimes, they were inspired by the prospect of moving straight from dictatorship to democracy. These sanguine expectations were certainly shared by many in the West. The fall of the Soviet Union had been attended by great optimism that, after a century of totalitarianism, war and genocide, the world would finally be safe for democracy. Pundits like Dennis Fukuyama even predicted that the post-Cold War generation had reached the "end of history" insofar as the future would no longer record the contentious competition between authoritarianism and pluralism; instead, "history" would presumably consist of little more than the unremarkable pursuit of knowledge, wealth, and human happiness.

Instead, the "democratization" process was quickly overshadowed by the acrimonious, and sometimes violent dissolution of multiethnic societies throughout the formerly Communist eastern half of Europe. Although the bloody demise of Yugoslavia grabbed most of the headlines, the independence of most other eastern bloc countries was attended by tensions and bloody secession movements across the Caucasus (*i.e.* Abkhazia, Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia). Moreover, the same process has played out elsewhere. Democratization in the Muslim World – whether in Afghanistan and Iraq following U.S. intervention, in post-Suharto Indonesia (*i.e.* Aceh, the Moluccas, East Timor) or among the successor states of the Arab Spring – has exposed deep rifts in multiethnic societies that had appeared to non-experts as culturally monolithic. Nor can we ignore the potential for ethnic conflict in countries like Myanmar as they move toward pluralism. Indeed, Western impatience with China's ruling elite fails to account for that country's complex mosaic of cultural and language groups that would quickly seek empowerment in the aftermath of free elections.

A central feature in ethnic conflict is the parallel existence of separate, competing national narratives that pit the peoples of defunct empires against one another. This is certainly the case across central Europe, where newly created nation-states have crafted mutually exclusive, proprietary historical accounts that justify their separate

existence. Inevitably, each narrative employs a different array of “truths”, many of which are either distorted or blatantly untrue, while carefully excising “inconvenient facts” that promote the utility of multiethnic coexistence and justify the dissonant narrative or political agenda of other national groups. The resulting, divergent recitations of history not only unite each new republic’s constituent “state-forming” nationality, but also sow mistrust, resentment and even hatred between them and other peoples with whom they had previously coexisted. In the former Yugoslavia mutually exclusive national narratives have divided the previously dominant Serbs against their former wartime adversaries in Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia and Kosovo.

Far from resolving these divisions, the democratization process has accelerated and intensified conflicts. It is virtually impossible for politicians to confront and expose national myths and inconvenient truths in an age of mass politics, particularly in democratic societies where the voting public has already internalized what it has learned from previous generations, whether in schoolbooks or across the kitchen table. Notwithstanding the many positive attributes of democracy and the almost universal faith that it inspires as an instrument of societal justice and stability, the greater accountability of popularly elected leaders mortgages their ability to confront and reconcile competing narratives that are firmly entrenched in popular memory.

The international community has employed a number of strategies for bridging the cognitive gap between peoples. Western media platforms such as Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and the BBC have disseminated news and information, while philanthropic NGOs like the Soros Foundation’s Open Society Institute have sponsored numerous confidence-building, “people-to-people” programs. International tribunals have painstakingly investigated, and then exposed criminal acts committed by all sides in conflict zones from Rwanda and West Africa to the former Yugoslavia. Yet none of these vehicles has been able to overcome the proprietary representations of “patriotic” political leaders --- and the great majority of “mainstream” media platforms that articulate the prevailing national narrative. This is especially evident today in Serbia, whose newly democratic leaders and free media continue to ignore or deny

the criminal record of the Milošević regime; the recent election of the neo-fascist Tomislav Nikolić attests to the grip of myth and denial over the Serbian people, the great majority of whom still adore mass murderers currently being tried for genocide at The Hague. Moreover, so long as they retain a de facto monopoly over public memory, perception, and interpretation, nationalist politicians there and elsewhere will continue to discredit and marginalize the few independent voices that challenge them. Indeed, there exist many among the region’s political, academic and media elite who privately concede the corruption of their vocal majority’s historical accounts, but who nonetheless lack the courage to take a public position.

## Research Findings

Over the past decade, an international consortium of 300+ historians and social scientists from 29 countries have researched, written and published a common history of the Yugoslav conflicts of the 1990s. In January 2009, Purdue University Press and the U.S. Institute of Peace jointly published *Confronting the Yugoslav Controversies: a Scholars’ Initiative*, which challenged the tendentious nationalistic narratives that have succeeded so well in dividing the peoples of central Europe, both exposing and discrediting each belligerent’s myths about the Yugoslav conflicts, while simultaneously inserting indisputable, but inconvenient facts known to their former adversaries. One year later a Serbo-Croatian edition appeared in Sarajevo. Its work is embodied in the research of twelve multinational research teams each of which was charged with focusing on the most contentious issues that impede mutual understanding between the Serbs and their wartime adversaries across the newly constructed territorial and cultural frontiers of former Yugoslavia.

From the beginning, the Scholars’ Initiative (SI) committed itself to three core principles that guided all its activities: (1) an absolute insistence on scholarly integrity and methodologies, (2) the inclusivity of both sources and participants from all “sides” in the Yugoslav conflicts, and (3) the adoption of full transparency of the programmatic use of electronic mail for transmission and for review of every draft of the twelve team reports to all project participants.

Whereas the presentation of a common narrative was itself revolutionary, the SI also broke new ground by engaging with the public in each of the Yugoslav successor states. From the outset, its leadership worked closely both with regional television, radio and print media in presenting its findings and with civic and political leaders (principally incumbent presidents, prime ministers and foreign ministers), who were apprised of the project's progress and of the hope that they would place a foot on the common platform that *their own scholars* had helped build. Over the past three years, political leaders in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo (though not yet Serbia) have responded to numerous news broadcasts throughout the region by issuing public endorsements of the project and its findings. Recognizing the SI's utility for achieving a systemic solution to the region's ethnic divisions, the U.S. State Department also actively supported the project by lobbying political leaders on its behalf. Indeed, in the three years since the publication of the initial English-language edition, the SI has achieved each of six objectives that it identified at the project's outset to:

- 1) forge lasting professional ties and dialogue among scholars across the former Yugoslavia, western Europe and North America
- 2) provide the first platform for assembling and analyzing primary and secondary sources from all sides of the Yugoslav conflicts in a single, balanced and readily accessible account
- 3) publish new, original research that exposes (some of) the myths and resolves (some of) those controversies that have foreclosed meaningful transnational communication between scholars and mutual understanding among peoples of the former Yugoslavia
- 4) impact the public consciousness of the ethnic and national groups of former Yugoslavia through public media
- 5) encourage political (and other opinion) leaders to adopt positions in public discourse that share or create common ground across the region's ethnic and national divides
- 6) create a model for transnational dialogue among scholars elsewhere in central Europe.

In November the SI will publish a second edition that will incorporate new evidence that has been uncovered since 2009; a second Serbo-Croatian edition will appear in Cyrillic script in 2013.

## Salient Implications

Given that the forces of Balkan nationalism have been evolving for nearly two centuries, it would be absurdly premature to proclaim any lasting measure of success. Nonetheless, the SI's achievement in presenting a common narrative offers a model for challenging the hegemony of nationalist discourse in the newly emerging democratic societies. Indeed, over the past year (August 2011, July 2012), members of the British Parliament's All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Cyprus have hosted presentations by SI Project Director Charles Ingrao and British academic experts as it searches for a solution to the 38-year deadlock in negotiations between the former British colony's Greek and Turkish communities. The SI is already widely known to policy makers at the U.S. State Department and to Congressional staffers, particularly on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. But this is just a start to correcting an endemic problem that has drained much of the Western world's humanity over the past century.

Given the central role that hegemonic narratives play in mobilizing and entrenching nationalist forces in democratic societies, it is naive to assume that frozen conflicts like Yugoslavia, Cyprus, and Israel-Palestine can be resolved anytime in the foreseeable future without confronting their competing national narratives. The same grim logic applies to the prospects for easing international tensions between countries that have been divided for generations by incompatible renditions of the past. After all, nearly a century has passed since the commission of the Armenian Genocide without any acknowledgment by generations of elected Turkish politicians; seven decades after the rape of Nanjing and untold "comfort women", successive Japanese parliaments cannot acknowledge Chinese and Korean narratives of their victimhood at the hands of the Japanese Imperial Army; six decades after the creation of Israel, its current government continues to block efforts by Israeli and Palestinian scholars to acknowledge common ground about the events of 1948; nor will democratically elected Indian and Pakistani governments ever be able to reconcile their mutually exclusive renditions of the sub-continent's violent dissolution just one year earlier.

Our continued failure to diagnose the cultural malaise behind these frozen conflicts will perpetuate the tensions that always complicate and frequently paralyze international cooperation on even the most mundane issues. That we have been working around these problems for over a half-century should not condemn us to perpetuating them when a systemic solution is within our reach. If we can derive solace from our dysfunctionality, it is that public education and literacy in much of Asia and most of Africa have yet to reach a stage where citizens can be mobilized on a comparable scale. With an estimated eighty percent of the world's land borders cutting across ethnic groups, there may be many more Yugoslavias ahead of us.

## References

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