

## Book Review

**Denisa Kostovicova. 2023. *Reconciliation by Stealth. How People Talk about War Crimes*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press. 246 pp., ISBN 9781501769030 (hardcover), ISBN 9781501769054 (epub), ISBN 9781501769047 (PDF), £ 54.95, open access**

Reviewed by **Nejra Nuna Čengić**, Independent Researcher, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, E-mail: nejrasa@gmail.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5416-4161>; and **Jacqueline Nießer**, Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg, Germany, E-mail: niesser@ios-regensburg.de. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3002-9774>

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How do people talk about war crimes with members of antagonistic ethnic groups?<sup>1</sup> This is the overarching question Denisa Kostovicova addresses in her book. Her study is based on the initiative for a Regional Commission for Establishing the Facts about War Crimes and Other Gross Violations of Human Rights Committed on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia from January 1, 1991 to December 31, 2001 (RECOM). Since 2006, RECOM has made an innovative attempt to establish a regional commission and has organized around 150 meetings and consultations with various groups and individuals interested in establishing the facts about the war crimes that were committed during Yugoslavia's protracted process of dissolution. These sessions were aimed at civic legitimization of an official transitional justice institution and were therefore extensively recorded, transcribed, and sometimes even translated into English.

Exploring whether reconciliation can be achieved in war-related discussions across ethnic lines, Kostovicova argues that it can, in fact, happen “by stealth”, remaining undetected by scholars due to the methodological and theoretical approaches they choose (4). In order to tackle this limitation, Kostovicova provides a rich discussion, drawing on multiple bodies of peacebuilding literature – the most notable of which is the literature on transitional justice –, combining them with theories of deliberation. She applies a mixed-method design, comprising a quantitative content analysis of 20 transcripts from the RECOM consultations, and a qualitative analysis drawing on her fieldwork (2013–2019), including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation of RECOM meetings, and a workshop with stakeholders.

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<sup>1</sup> This joint review was written as part of the Horizon Europe project “RETLAMI-SEE: Enhancing Capacities for Quality and Impactful Research on Transformations, Labour and Migration in Southeast-Europe.” See the project's website, <https://retlami-see.fpn.unibl.org/eng/> (accessed 8 July 2025).

Kostovicova starts by contrasting RECOM's development with that of other transitional justice efforts in the post-Yugoslav states, to which RECOM can be read as a response with its victim-focused, civil society-led, and regional approach. Chapter 1 also tackles, from a bird's eye perspective, the difficulties the RECOM initiative experienced, as well as its reluctant political and often hostile public reception in all the post-Yugoslav societies. Many scholars saw these difficulties as tantamount to failure – an assessment the author challenges, emphasizing how the RECOM process nevertheless continued. In Kostovicova's view, however, this does not yet achieve reconciliation, but is effectively a path in that direction. This is something she then empirically measures in the chapters that follow, referring to the high-quality deliberative discussions of past wrongs as well as the recognition of the ethnic other and their war-related suffering.

In Chapter 2, Kostovicova describes that she is taking ethnic identity as the main, almost exclusive lens for her study, and she defines ethnic identity not as something static, but as an "interactional accomplishment" (44). She justifies her choice with the fact that ethnicity was the reason people experienced war-related suffering.

Her criticism of how the concept of deliberation has been applied normatively and superficially for transitional justice purposes, and her commitment to adapting the deliberative theory to fit post-conflict contexts is most clearly revealed in Chapter 3. Here, the author presents her quantitative strategy of investigating the quality of deliberation at RECOM. To measure the quality of cross-ethnic communication about war crimes in divided communities, she refines an existing measurement instrument – the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) – to create the Discourse Quality Index for the Study of Transitional Justice (DQITJ). Applying this instrument to 1,211 speech acts from transcripts of 20 consultations (2010–2011) about the draft statute of the regional fact-finding commission, she observes a prevalence of deliberative virtues such as equality of participation, rationality of justification, as well as an orientation toward the common good, respect, and elements of storytelling. In this chapter, she points out the high quality of the post-conflict deliberation that constituted these RECOM consultations.

In Chapter 4, Kostovicova takes her quantitative content analysis a step further by looking at factors that impacted high-quality deliberation, such as gender, speaker and stakeholder type, translation, polarization, subjectivity in rational justification, and storytelling. She specifically focuses on how ethnic identity matters here. Counterintuitively, she finds that talk of highly polarizing issues defined in ethnic terms, such as war crimes, increased the quality of deliberation. Her findings counter the assumption that only nonethnic discourses such as on universal and human rights values can produce a high-quality exchange. However, the title of Chapter 4, "Words of Reason and Talk of Pain", is misleading, as in the comprehensive and fine-tuned quantitative analysis of text as data, "talk of pain" has all but disappeared.

Chapter 5 deals with measuring and qualifying interactivity across ethnic lines. Kostovicova shows that, in the RECOM consultations she analyzes, greater interactivity existed across ethnic lines than between speakers belonging to the same ethnic group. Differentiating the interactions by level of agreement and disagreement, and further subdividing this into respectful and disrespectful disagreement, the author found similar levels of interactivity in interethnic and intraethnic exchanges.

While the tremendous effort Kostovicova put in to quantifying and measuring deliberation about justice after war crimes through civil society must be acknowledged, caution should prevail when it comes to generalizing her findings. The reader must not lose sight of the fact that the corpus for the meticulous quantitative content analysis concerned a specific part of the RECOM consultations: the discussions of the draft statute defining the commission's functions, attributions, and responsibilities. These discussions "approximate parliamentary debates about draft bills, although they represent citizens' deliberations" (58). It is therefore misleading to treat the draft statute discussions as casual "talk about war crimes", as the book's subtitle suggests. They represent a distinct element of a debate in a setting organized by civil society actors, with a protocol, documentation, rules, and a clear aim.

As the only one based on qualitative research, Chapter 6 gives the stage to the people involved in RECOM and addresses a number of important contextual questions. Kostovicova shows how the high quality of cross-ethnic deliberation becomes reconciliatory once the ethnic other and their suffering are recognized. Focusing on the "enactment of ethnic identities" (109) during the exchange under study, she demonstrates that discursive bonds based on solidarity emerged when interlocutors departed from seeing an opposing ethnic group's opinion as homogeneous. This included developing empathy and recognizing the suffering of the ethnic other, as well as avoiding incrimination when speaking about violence experienced or witnessed. The latter is usually done by describing the situation in detached terms, without naming the ethnic group perpetrating the violence, for instance. Kostovicova observed how an unintended consequence of this was even the acknowledgment of war crimes committed by one's own ethnic group. She concludes that the value of the RECOM consultations was that "people realized that suffering is universal, although the situations and the contexts in which their closest family members were killed or forcefully disappeared were different" (118).

The book is theoretically and methodologically inspiring. However, it is slightly too self-congratulatory at the expense of sidelining its limitations. Its central, almost exclusive, analytical prism is ethnic identity, presented as something dynamic, but at the same time analyzed as something predetermined. This is even expanded to the assumed *solely* ethnic division in the societies in question. An illustration of our critique is how Kostovicova interprets the observed civic identities of some

consultation participants as just one, nonexclusionary form on the spectrum of possible ethnic identities within an ethnic group (114). This raises several questions: How exactly does the RECOM material show who is of which ethnic identity? Kostovicova argues that “the margin of error in recognizing someone’s ethnic identity was minimal” because speakers introduced themselves and had “tacit knowledge [...] to identify interlocutors” (98). How does her approach relate to identity politics that she herself widely criticizes? And lastly, to what extent did other, unaddressed categories, such as participants’ life trajectories and social relations within Yugoslavia play a role in the creation of cross-ethnic bonds of solidarity and the high quality of interethnic deliberation during the RECOM consultations?

Kostovicova’s assessment that the civic consultations were a major achievement of RECOM and had an impact on the relations and understanding between its participants echoes Jacqueline Nießer’s study of the organization, which concluded that RECOM has created a space for understanding – yet without applying an ethnic lens.<sup>2</sup> And while we may hope that everyday exchanges are having similar effects, we must keep in mind that the RECOM consultations did not constitute vernacular “talk about war crimes”, but were a specific part of a debate in a setting organized by civil society. Kostovicova has commendably shown how those who were injured are capable not only of sharing stories of harm, but also of productively discussing how their experiences should be addressed, giving them agency beyond the mere articulation of their pain. Moreover, Kostovicova’s approach made us think about the long-term consequences of the conflict. Due to the ethnically divided organization of life in significant parts of the post-Yugoslav societies people do not have a lot of chances to physically meet members of other ethnic groups. From this point of view, Kostovicova’s analysis of RECOM’s work undoubtedly encourages the creation of similar spaces and invites policy solutions. Political scientists, practitioners, and scholars of peacebuilding and transitional justice should read her book for inspiration in crafting precisely such spaces.

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<sup>2</sup> Jacqueline Nießer. 2020. *Die Wahrheit der Anderen. Transnationale Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung in Post-Jugoslawien am Beispiel der REKOM Initiative*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; cf. Jacqueline Nießer, “The Region after Yugoslavia.” *Connections. A Journal for Historians and Area Specialists*. 9 July 2021, <https://www.connections.clio-online.net/article/id/fda-133270> (accessed 8 July 2025).