

## UNITED AGAINST DIVISION

**„Today, I am the proudest ambassador of Bosnia & Herzegovina in the whole world. Thank you for this, dear students from Jajce.“** These were the opening sentences of the speech that Ms. Mirsada Colakovic, the ambassador of Bosnia & Herzegovina to the Netherlands gave during the 2018 Max van der Stoel Award Ceremony held last November in The Hague. Back then, a group of students, teachers and activists from the Bosnian city of Jajce received this award „in recognition of their outstanding courage and inspirational activism, which led to the prevention of further segregation in schools in Jajce as well as throughout the country.“ As a member of this group carefully listening to Ms. Colakovic’s words and receiving the award, I want to tell you the story of our struggle for better education.



Samir Beharic

I was born and raised in Jajce, city known for its beautiful waterfall, medieval history and as a place where Socialist Yugoslavia was founded. After the last war that ended 24 years ago, Jajce became infamous for its ethnically segregated primary schools. The so-called phenomenon of “two schools under the same roof”, made to put borders into students’ minds, had a strong counter-effect on me and my childhood. The apartheid project, one of a kind in 21st century Europe in my hometown Jajce, has been polarizing young people and putting hate and nationalism at the top of the school curriculum for two decades already. I know how it feels to attend classes in sepa-

rate classroom than my Catholic friend Marko, although we were neighbors. Unwillingly, I was one of the guinea pigs of the post-war educational system in Bosnia & Herzegovina. That experience has shaped good part of what I am today. I refused to become just another piece of that puzzle. I believe knowledge and high-quality education are the key to a prosperous and tolerant society, but the prosperity can be achieved only if all of us are united for good and united against ethnic and any other division.

As a student of an ethnically mixed high school in Jajce and a Sencor Magazine journalist, I decided to make a change. I was even more motivated to act in my local community after attending Swiss Helsinki Committee seminars and learning from some of the world’s most experienced diplomats, scholars and experts about the values of human rights, free media and high-quality education.

However, my ethnically segregated primary school was still running according to the old rules. After applying for a small international grant with Youth Center Jajce, the oldest post-war NGO in Jajce and raising enough money to renovate the football and basketball fields, I invited the school principals to join the project, and they agreed. Both Bosniak - Muslim and Croat - Catholic students were suddenly constructing their own sport fields together for the first time since the end of the war. Despite the fact that the system has partly managed to place the seed of hate into the heads of those young people, I realized that not so much is needed to bring them together while they are still young. The Youth Center Jajce has managed to raise a generati-

on of young people, future leaders ready to stand up for the progressive values they cherish. This generation also includes students who achieved something no one ever achieved in post-war Bosnia & Herzegovina: to overturn a political decision to segregate already integrated high schools.

In the summer of 2016, a group of local politicians came to the idea of dividing two ethnically mixed high schools in Jajce. Both Bosniak and Croat nationalist politicians were strongly supporting this idea. They have profited from the ethnic division for the last two decades. In their eyes, two additional segregated schools were seen as an “investment” for future ethnic and social disunity, and of course election votes. However, the students stood up and protested for a year. Yes, for a year straight! They went to the streets attracting attention of national and international media. Short after, the international organizations and foreign embassies openly supported students’ struggle, putting pressure on politicians to give up from their initial plan.

By the end of July 2017, all the efforts to bring students from Jajce together in a formal way beautifully resulted in student uprising that prevented local politicians to divide best friends and potentially make them into enemies. The schools stayed unified, and the cantonal ministry of education accepted the students’ demands.

Segregated schools have proven to be the best training ground for becoming a nationalist voter. Bosniak and Croat nationalist parties have failed in their plan to segregate a

school for the first time since the end of the war. Some of the leaders of this student struggle - Ivica, Nikolas, Tarik and Ajla, young people of the Youth Center of Jajce - and I have worked together in the past and during the student protest. They are the future pillars of our society and true leaders of a new, future-oriented generation of young people.



Jugendliche von Jajce vor dem Friedenspalast in Den Haag mit dem Hohen Kommissar für nationale Minderheiten der OSZE Bild copyright OSZE

Currently, there are 56 segregated schools in Bosnia & Herzegovina. Our goal was not only to prevent the segregation of high schools in Jajce, but also to inspire young people all around our country to stand up. Not just to prevent further segregation, but to unite against far too long segregated schools. Far more is achievable than some might think. Clear vision, strong will and persistence is what it takes to bring down every bad decision. Our struggle for better education is not over, it has just begun. I am sure we will make even more ambassadors proud.

Samir Beharic