

Competitive victimhood.

Ethnonational conflicts and possibilities for reconciliation

Analyzing Competitive Victimhood: Narratives of Recognition and Non-recognition in the Pursuit of Reconciliation

Çağla Demirel,
(Doctoral
dissertation:
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187 pages.

In her doctoral thesis *Analyzing Competitive Victimhood* political scientist Çağla Demirel has investigated ethnonational conflicts and possibilities for reconciliation, looking specifically at narratives of conflicts where both sides want to establish that “we” have suffered more than “them”. This phenomenon is not uncommon, and conventionally referred to as competitive victimhood (CV).

Competitive victimhood is thus, simply put, the tendency to consider one’s own group as having suffered comparatively more (during a past violent conflict) relative to an outgroup. In the literature, the CV concept is defined in a number of different ways, but it is typically linked to important aspects of intergroup relations (for example, resistance towards resolving the conflict) or intrapersonal processes (for example, biased memory or self-perceptions). Such narratives of historical suffering may also be used for rationalizing various transgressions in the present. The data analyzed in the PhD thesis include interviews, public opinion polls, political party manifestos, political statements, NGO reports, newspapers, documents, and memory sites.

DEMIREL’S PHD THESIS is based on four papers, dealing with different empirical cases and different aspects of competitive victimhood. Also, the cases are selected to include post-conflict societies after different levels of violence. Paper I is “Competitive Victimhood and Reconciliation: The Case of Turkish-Armenian Relations” (published in *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*). It deals with especially difficult conflicts, where competitive victimhood has become a component of the very identities of the conflicting parties. Using both public opinion polls and interviews, the author compares Turkish and Armenian victimhood narratives (relating to the Armenian genocide). The article suggests that chances for reconciliation in this case are very low, but not entirely non-existent.

Paper II is published in *Peacebuilding* and is called “Re-conceptualising Competitive Victimhood in Reconciliation Processes: The Case of Northern Ireland”. In the literature, CV tends to follow a crude binary distinction between the existence of competitive victimhood (which



Sarajevo (from the cover of the dissertation).

PHOTO: ÇAĞLA DEMIREL

means unresolved conflict) and “common” or “inclusive” victimhood (which could mean reconciliation). In order to come up with a more sophisticated analytical distinction, Demirel suggests a five-fold typology, drawing on the Northern Irish case (Catholic Republicans versus Protestant Unionists). The five categories indicate varying levels of competitiveness: revengeful victimhood, strong-CV, mid-CV, weak-CV, and inclusive victimhood. In paper II, interviews are complemented with analyses of party manifestos.

PAPER III, published in *Third World Quarterly*, is “Exploring Inclusive Victimhood Narratives: The Case of Bosnia-Herzegovina”. In this paper, Demirel draws attention to the importance of narratives of inclusive victimhood for successful reconciliation processes (“we all suffered together”) – and ultimately, as a way of overcoming competitive victimhood. Using her own typology (above), the article focuses on different victimhood identities and different narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina that recognize outgroup victimhood and acknowledge ingroup responsibility for doing harm (Bosniak-Bosnian Serbs relations). The Bosnian case suggests that such narratives, of shared suffering, can be instrumental to peaceful coexistence. However, in situations where the use of violence has been highly asymmetrical (in this case, including the Srebrenica genocide) shared responsibility for atrocities is not very likely.

Paper IV was unpublished at the time of the public defence (but submitted to *East European Politics*), and is at least thematically an extension of paper III: “Does Power-Sharing Facilitate

Continued. Competitive victimhood

Memory-Sharing? Bosnian Croat Narratives in Post-War Bosnia-Herzegovina”. Although power-sharing and memory-sharing are different things, it is not unlikely that constructing a power parity between former adversaries could enable reconciliation and, in the long run, the creation of shared narratives. Or, maybe this would only be naïve, wishful thinking? Examining Bosniak and Bosnian Croat relations, who because of the Dayton Peace Agreement have experienced power-sharing, Demirel finds only little evidence of shared memories. Admittedly, Bosniak war stories and Bosnian Croat war stories overlap in the sense that Serbian aggression in Bosnia and Herzegovina is acknowledged by both parts; and the same goes for recognizing Bosniak victimhood, in particular. However, when it comes to the conflict between Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats, memory remains divided.

FOR SEVERAL REASONS, it is an impressive work. Drawing on political science, peace and conflict studies and memory studies, Demirel develops a novel framework for studies on competitive victimhood (see especially paper II). It is a nuanced discussion that treats the notion of victimhood from a relational perspective (by considering the question of reciprocity); the author examines variations in victimhood narratives in a way that does not exclude the recognition of outgroup suffering nor avoid the question of ingroup responsibility for doing harm (see especially paper III). It is a well-written, relevant, and timely contribution to existing research on the prospects for reconciliation in post-conflict societies. ✕

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