



Weekly Briefing

Bosnia-Herzegovina social briefing:

BIH- Peter Handke receiving a Nobel Prize sparks various reactions in BIH

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In announcement on October 8th the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Royal Academy decided to award Austrian writer Peter Handke the Nobel Prize for Literature for, as they said, “an influential work that explores the periphery and peculiarity of human existence with linguistic ingenuity.” However, the main follow up on this news dealt little with his literary work. At least such was a case in the media of ex-Yugoslav countries where his controversial political views and unusual bond with Serbia have been scrutinized from various points.

Among the comments posted on social media, mainly Facebook and Twitter; congratulatory notes were altered with critiques, disapprovals and disappointments about the decision. In much of the Western media the award was criticized for Handke's support for the Milosevic regime in Serbia (former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) and denial of genocide committed by the Serb army in Srebrenica and during the siege of Sarajevo. Moreover, Handke's public advocacy and political engagement on behalf of the Milosevic regime, as one of the rare Europeans doing so after the fall of Milosevic, estranged him from a part of Serbian public, while his stance on the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and Kosovo question particularly angered (Kosovo) Albanians. Pristina-based press reported that Handke was known for his ties to the Serbs and “was sternly opposed to the 1999 NATO bombing that brought freedom to Kosovo”. Articles recalling Handke visiting (Serb enclaves) in Kosovo and reportedly donating EUR 50,000 to local Serbs, his speech on Milosevic`s funeral in Pozarevac, befriending some prominent Serb nationalists made the headlines to story. Kosovo`s Ambassador to the US, Vlora Chitaku posted on Twitter: "In a world full of brilliant writers, the Nobel Committee has decided to reward propaganda for ethnic hatred and violence. Something has gone wrong!", while journalist Adriatik Kelmendi on his Facebook wrote that giving the Nobel Prize to Handke was "a shame".

Reactions from non-Serb (Bosniak) community

Bosnian public was no less consternated with the Nobel Committee decision. Among the first to react were Bosniak politicians and NGO representatives protesting against Handke`s denialism and pro-Serb(ian) political proclivities. Sefik Dzaferovic, Bosniak MOP (member of BIH Presidency) considers the decision of the Nobel Committee scandalous and shameful. In his statement to BIH media he said that it is shameful to ignore the fact that Handke was

defending Milosevic, but also his “executors” Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, both convicted for war crimes and genocide before the ITCY (UN International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia). Croat MOP Zeljko Komsic was also direct in his critique saying that Nobel Committee founders had in mind people who contribute to peace, “not characters like Handke who spread hatred and deny crimes and genocide”.

Reisu-l-ulema of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina Husein Kavazovic condemned the decision of the Swedish Academy calling it "a bad message and an insult to the victims of genocide and other crimes against humanity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Kosovo." He has also requested from the Nobel Committee to change its decision and call on BIH writers association and other ‘people of the pen’ to protest against the Nobel Committee’s decision. On October 9, The Women of Srebrenica Association (Zene Srebrenice, once also nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize) held peaceful protest in Tuzla, expressing outrage over the fact that the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to “genocide denier” Peter Handke. Nura Begovic, their vice president said victim’s families request the Royal Swedish Academy to reconsider the decision, president Hajra Katic “refused to receive the Nobel Peace Prize” should the one ever be awarded to this organization. Similar appeal arrived from Munira Subasic from Majke Srebrenice (Mother Movement of the Srebrenica and Zepa), both the most prominent ‘anti-denialist’ NGO organizations in BIH.

In summing up reactions on the Bosniak side three issues were prominent. Most important was Handke’s denial of genocide committed by the Serbs during the Bosnian war. Bosniak public and media outlets reminded that during the war (1992 -1995) around 100,000 people were killed “through a systematic campaign of mass killings, concentration camps and forced deportations”. As particularly sensitive was Srebrenica massacre in July 1995 where “the families of victims of the Srebrenica genocide are still searching for about 1,300 members of their families”. It is noteworthy a statement issued by Srebrenica - Potocari Memorial Center saying that their fight for the truth has certainly received a heavy blow and “thanks to the Handke (being awarded Nobel) Prize, many genocide deniers will now appear.” Second was reporting on international reactions in questioning Handke’s “credentials” for the prize. Notwithstanding the professional literary criteria, most media in Europe criticized the Nobel Committee decision by pointing out his controversial political views. The main line of argument is that this year's Nobel Prize winner in the 1990s has been open supporter of the Milosevic regime and openly denied genocide in BIH. Alexander Hemon, an American-Bosnian/k writer, screenwriter and columnist, lecturer at the prestigious Princeton University in the United States, wrote for the New York Times an article (re-published by BIH media) in which he, by using ironic pseudo-orientalist angle as “a Bosnian person, not enough European as Swedes from a

Committee”, criticized the decision as politically insensitive and irresponsible, claiming that he cannot read Handke's works since he devoted himself to the “lost case” of Milosevic. The British Guardian was quoted in recalling Handke demanding the Nobel Prize for literature to be abolished in 2014. Some media remember Handke being named an honorary citizen of Belgrade in 2015, and a foreign member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in 2012 as a proof that his political aberrations didn't change. Third issue was attacking credibility of the Swedish Academy, the Nobel Committee and – paradoxically- political blindness in decision criteria. Kosovar journalist Kelmendi compared the decision with giving a writer who celebrated Hitler the Nobel Prize for Literature." Many expressed doubt the same “inappropriate” decision would ever be given to someone who, for example, denies the Holocaust. In ironic twist, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek said the award proves to be exactly what it became to be, a “false canonization” of literature.

Reactions from the Serb community in BIH (and beyond)

Handke`s post-war connections with Republika Srpska are also well known. In 2013 he was elected a foreign member by the Academy of Sciences and Arts of the Republika Srpska. He was known to speak in superlative terms about his connections with the Bosnian Serbs, going so far as to say once that he will always stay true to his feelings and loyal to Serbia and once was even quoted saying that "Republika Srpska and Serbia are two countries where true Europe still lives".

Naturally, the Serb community in BIH through media showed general satisfaction with Handke`s literary success. Several media (Nezavisne, Glas Srpske, RTRS) depicted the news in the similar manner as Serbian media, emphasizing that he was a “friend”, “supporter”, “advocate” of Serbia and Serbs during the “worst times” and despite the international mainstream.

Serb(ian) media expectedly quoted international media closer to Serbian perspective. Russian media gave an “international face” to the articles on special bond between Serbia and Handke. In its article, Sputnik mentioned Handke`s friends in Orahovac and Velika Hoca (Kosovo), his publicly shared opinion against Kosovo's unilaterally declared independence, arguing that the state cannot be built on hatred. Political controversies on Handke`s award were also mentioned, but in the context of “deserved, but belated” award due to “unfavorable international climate”, “anti-Serb(ian) feelings in certain circles” and alike.

Serb MOP Milorad Dodik was the first to break the comment, assessing in his statement that awarding the Nobel Prize for Literature to Austrian Peter Handke is a proof that "justice has not been lost." On behalf of Republika Srpska and the Serbs in BIH he sent congratulatory

letter to Handke, stating that he like all citizens of Republika Srpska, was delighted to receive the news of the world's most prestigious award for literature awarded to a “great friend of Serbs and Serbia, who, when many in the world were silent, vociferously opposed the NATO bombing of Serbs in BIH and Serbia.”

Emir Kusturica, a renowned Serbian filmmaker (originally from BIH), said that the Nobel Prize for Literature won by Austrian writer Peter Handke was a great thing for literature and a fair decision. Kusturica told to Serbian *Vecernje Novosti*: "Handke is a man whose political strife was a continuation of his literature dealing with the hidden content of human existence, outsiders who were and remain committed to justice". Serbian Minister of Culture Vladan Vukosavljevic stated that Peter Handke received the Nobel Prize “deservedly, but with delay”. He has also suggested the Nobel Prize must have been given to him a long time ago, “but politics has interfered”. In the same vein, Belgrade media talked about artistic aspect of his writings, mentioning slightly pronounced political windfalls his affiliations with Serbia could have for the Serb people and their current political challenges in BIH and Kosovo.

Finally, the “Handke controversy” was for the part of the media an excuse to rehearse the keywords that underpin the myths of the Serb historical exceptionality, historical sufferings, hostile geopolitical environment and their ‘just’ historical cause. Depicting the hard, but proud times during Milosevic’s era was particular example of such self-indulging narratives.