

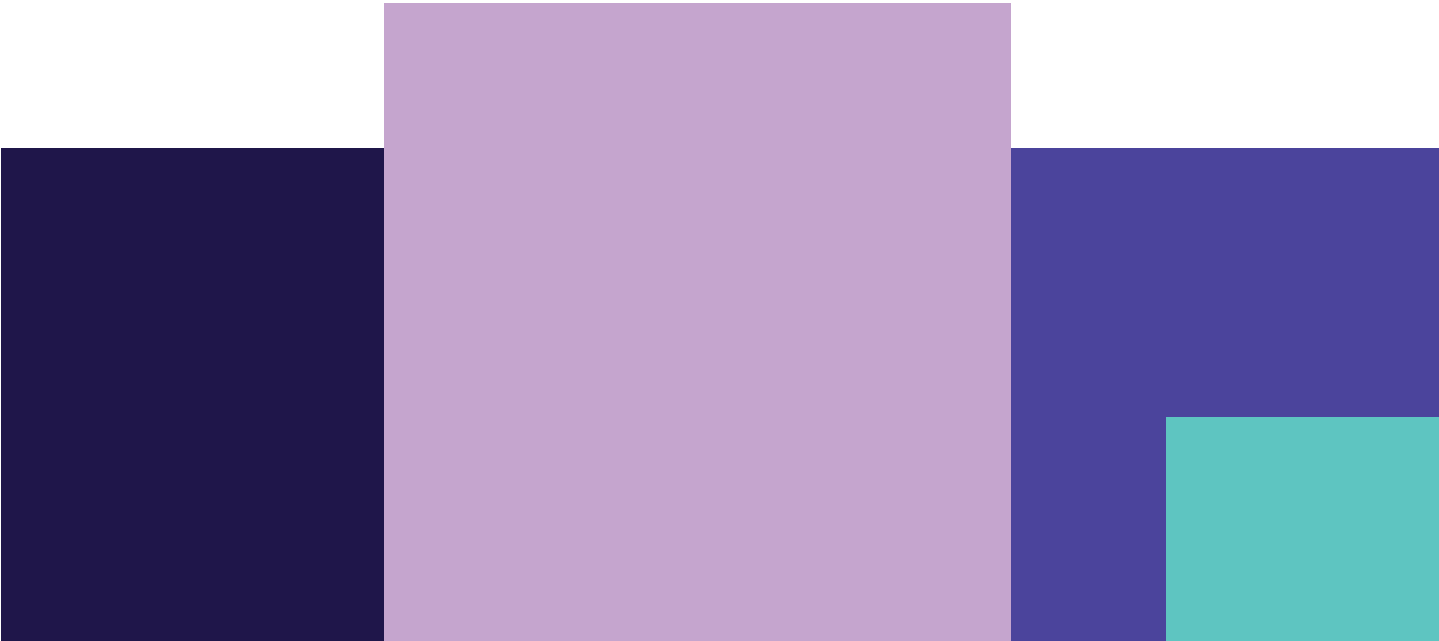
Different Memories, Shared Futures:

Towards Inclusive Memorialisation in the Western Balkans

**Conversations on Remembrance
and the Politics of Memory, Trauma,
and Identity in Polarised Societies**

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Introduction

How societies remember violent pasts has become one of the defining political questions of our time. Across the world, memories of war, repression and historical injustice continue to shape public debate, influence elections, determine who belongs within the political community and define the boundaries of what societies imagine to be possible. Far from fading with time, contested histories often become increasingly central to contemporary politics, mobilised by political leaders, amplified through media and reproduced through education, commemorative practices and public discourse. In societies emerging from conflict, memory is therefore never simply about the past. It becomes one of the principal ways through which the future itself is negotiated.

For many years, memorialisation was understood primarily as an ethical undertaking. It sought to honour victims, preserve historical truth, acknowledge suffering and prevent denial. These remain indispensable responsibilities. Yet experience from the Western Balkans, as well as from many other post-conflict societies, demonstrates that remembrance alone cannot transform the conditions that allow violence and exclusion to persist. Memorials can acknowledge suffering, but they can also reinforce division. Commemorations can create empathy, but they can also deepen competitive victimhood. Historical truth can

establish facts, yet facts alone rarely determine how societies choose to live together afterwards.

These realities invite a different question. Rather than asking only how societies should remember, we must also ask what kinds of relationships different practices of remembrance make possible. Can memorialisation contribute not only to acknowledging the past, but also to strengthening democratic culture? Can it help societies move beyond simplified narratives without requiring agreement on history? Can remembering become not merely an act of preservation, but a practice through which citizens learn to inhabit shared civic space despite continuing disagreement about the past?

It is around these questions that the Different Memories, Shared Futures webinar series was conceived. Bringing together leading international scholars and practitioners working at the intersection of memory, peacebuilding, transitional justice and democratic resilience, the series – hosted by Refik Hodzic – explores memorialisation not as a static act of remembrance but as a living social and political practice. The conversations move beyond familiar debates about monuments, museums and commemorations to examine the deeper processes through which collective trauma shapes narratives, narratives shape politics, and politics, in turn, shapes the possibilities for more inclusive futures.

The essays collected here, which are entirely based on the conversations hosted in the webinar series, follow that intellectual journey. Frauke de Weijer and Dr. Alison Castel begin by examining how collective trauma reorganises the narratives through which societies make sense of themselves, reminding us that memorialisation is ultimately about engaging with systems of meaning rather than preserving isolated stories. Mark Freeman explores how those narratives become intertwined with processes of political polarisation, demonstrating that democratic resilience depends upon protecting the space in which disagreement remains possible without becoming existential conflict. Professor Ann Rigney invites us to reconsider memory itself, arguing that societies must remember not only suffering but also solidarity, civic courage and the many moments in which people resisted violence and imagined different futures. Finally, Professor Denisa Kostovicova shows that memory has become one of the central arenas of democratic contestation, asking not whether remembrance should be political, but what kind of politics different forms of remembrance sustain.

Taken together, these conversations suggest that inclusive memorialisation is not about producing a single shared narrative of the past. Such an ambition would neither be realistic nor desirable in plural societies shaped by profoundly different experiences of violence. Rather, inclusive memorialisation seeks to cultivate something both more modest and more transformative: the democratic capacity to hold different memories in conversation without allowing them to become permanent instruments of exclusion. It asks how societies can preserve historical truth while expanding empathy, acknowledge suffering without reducing identity to victimhood, and confront difficult histories while keeping open the possibility of shared futures.

At a time when democratic societies around the world face rising polarisation, shrinking civic space and renewed attempts to weaponise history for political mobilisation, these questions reach far beyond the Western Balkans. The challenge is no longer simply how we remember the past. It is whether our ways of remembering enlarge or diminish our collective capacity to imagine living together in the future.

Biographies

Frauke de Weijer is an independent consultant in the field of conflict prevention, peacebuilding and inclusive governance, with degrees from the University of Utrecht and Harvard University. She previously worked at the European Centre for Policy Development Management (ECPDM) in the Conflict, Security and Resilience Programme, and also spent over ten years in development practice, notably in Kenya and Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, she worked for seven years as an advisor to several Afghan government ministries, strengthening inclusive governance policies and institutions. She subsequently pursued a mid-career master and became an associate fellow at the Centre for International Development at the Harvard Kennedy School.

Currently she primarily works as a consultant with different clients from governments, to think tanks and NGOs. In addition, she serves as an associate consultant for PeaceNexus, a peacebuilding foundation based in Switzerland. She has recently been involved in a process spearheaded by the President of Kyrgyzstan, to develop a policy on strengthening a shared, inclusive identity in the country.

Dr. Alison Castel is an Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Communication Studies at Regis University, where her research and teaching centres on critical approaches to conflict, narrative and dialogue. She holds a PhD in Peace and Conflict Studies from George Mason University, with a specialisation in narrative and conflict. Her work focuses on the narrative dynamics of power, legitimacy, voice and agency in settings marked by conflict, tension and inequity.

Castel has over 20 years of experience in peace and conflict studies across research, teaching and practice, including field-based work in Colombia and Indonesia, as well as engagements in Israel, Palestine, Rwanda and Northern Ireland, with an emphasis on examining the intersection of national and grassroots perspectives. Her recent work examines narrative engagement across difference, including how different narrative strategies can either reinforce or reduce adversarial dynamics.



Mark Freeman is the Founder and Executive Director of the Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT). A leading expert in political transitions and high-level peace negotiations with more than 30 years of experience, he is regularly consulted for advice on crisis management and conflict resolution across the world. Prior to founding IFIT, Mr. Freeman was Chief of External Relations at the International Crisis Group. Previously, he worked at the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in New York and as a corporate lawyer in Toronto.

Freeman is the co-author of *Negotiating Transitional Justice* (Cambridge, 2020), which draws upon his years as an adviser inside the Colombian peace talks in Havana. He holds a Bachelor of Arts from McGill University, a Juris Doctor from the University of Ottawa Faculty of Law, and a Master of Laws from Columbia Law School where he was a Human Rights Fellow and James Kent Scholar.

Professor Ann Rigney, until her retirement in 2024, held the chair of Comparative Literature at Utrecht University. Ever since her PhD thesis, published as *The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution* (Cambridge UP, 1990), she has been fascinated by the intersections between narrative, collective identity, and competing interpretations of the past. She has published widely in the field of modern memory cultures, with projects both on the nineteenth century and on contemporary developments. She has written in particular on issues relating to mediation, transnationalism, and, most recently, the role of memory in activism. Her monograph *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Cornell UP, 2001) explored the role of fictionality in the writing of history from the early nineteenth century to the present. *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move* (Oxford UP, 2012) explored the long term reception of the writings of Walter Scott in material culture and political discourses. Her most recent monograph is *Remembering Hope: The Cultural Afterlife of Protest* (Oxford UP, 2025) shows how the mediated recollection of protest intervenes in the present and offers resistance to the course of history.

Professor Denisa Kostovicova

graduated from the University of Maine, U.S., and has a PhD and MPhil from the University of Cambridge, and an MA from the Central European University, Czech Republic. Before joining the LSE, she held Junior Research Fellowships at Wolfson College, Cambridge, and Linacre College, Oxford. Prior to pursuing her graduate studies, she worked as a journalist during the wars of Yugoslavia's dissolution in 1990s, reporting for the CNN World Report and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, among others.

She is the author of *Kosovo: The Politics of Identity and Space* (Routledge, 2005) and *Reconciliation by Stealth: How People Talk about War Crimes* (Cornell University Press, 2024), which is the Winner of the Best Book in Human Rights of the International Studies Association (ISA). She has co-edited a number of volumes on nationalism, globalisation, and postconflict reconstruction. Her work has been awarded with Honourable Mention of the Women's Forum Article Prize of the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES), has informed policy-making at the EU, UN and in the UK.

Refik Hodzic is a strategic

communications and transitional justice specialist, writer, journalist and justice activist from Prijedor, Bosnia and Herzegovina. In recent years, working with the European Institute for Peace and the UN International Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, Hodzic has worked with victims of massive crimes in Syria, Yemen, Myanmar, Afghanistan and Ukraine, focusing on ensuring justice for mass atrocities and empowering victims to have a voice in decision-making forums which affect them directly. Previously, he served as director of communications at the International Center for Transitional Justice and in various capacities at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Hodzic is an award-winning journalist, film-maker and writer, whose published work mainly focuses on explorations of the impact of mass violence on communities, their perceptions of justice and their struggle for remembrance. He is a recipient of the Civic Courage Award from Fontbonne University in St. Louis.



In Conversation with Frauke de Weijer and Dr. Alison Castel: How Collective Trauma Shapes the Stories Societies Live By



When something traumatic happens, the ground underneath your feet falls to pieces.

Frauke de Weijer

Every society emerging from violence eventually begins telling stories about what happened. At first, those stories appear to serve a simple purpose: they explain loss, they honour those who suffered, they help individuals and communities make sense of experiences that seem almost impossible to comprehend. In the aftermath of war, repression or atrocity, remembering is often understood as an ethical obligation, a way of preserving truth, acknowledging victims and ensuring that future generations know what took place. Yet memory rarely remains confined to the past.

Over time, the stories societies tell about violence begin to perform a different function. They become the frameworks through which people interpret the present, understand themselves and imagine the future. They shape perceptions of belonging and exclusion, determine whose suffering is recognised and whose is marginalised, and quietly establish the emotional boundaries within which politics itself unfolds. Long after violence has ended, these stories continue to influence how societies respond to new crises, how they understand difference and how they negotiate the possibility of living together.



It was precisely this transformation from memory as remembrance to memory as a system of meaning that lay at the centre of the second webinar in the British Council's *Different Memories, Shared Futures: Towards Inclusive Memorialisation in the Western Balkans* series. Drawing on their influential paper *Fractured Stories, Fragmented Societies: Addressing Collective Trauma Through Narrative Engagement*, published by the Institute for Integrated Transitions, Frauke de Weijer and Alison Castel invited participants to ask one of the most important questions facing post-conflict societies experiencing deep polarisation: how does collective trauma reshape the narratives through which societies understand themselves, and what does that mean for anyone seeking to build more inclusive forms of remembrance?

The answer begins with a distinction that is surprisingly absent from many discussions about transitional justice and memorialisation. Trauma, Frauke de Weijer explains, is usually understood as an individual experience. We recognise how profoundly violence can alter a person's relationship to the world, disrupting their sense of identity, safety and belonging. Healing, in that context, often involves rebuilding a coherent sense of self, and finding a new story through which life can once again make sense.

"But something similar happens," she observes, "at group level, at societal

level." Collective trauma does not simply consist of many individuals experiencing suffering at the same time. It transforms the way an entire community understands its place in the world. "The sense of identity, the sense of belonging, takes a hit," she explains. The familiar moral landscape through which people once navigated their lives no longer feels stable. "It's like the ground underneath your feet is falling to pieces."

That image of the ground disappearing beneath one's feet became one of the defining metaphors of the conversation because it captures something far more profound than loss alone. Violence does not only destroy lives, institutions or physical spaces, but it disrupts meaning itself. Communities suddenly find that the assumptions through which they had understood themselves, their neighbours and the wider world no longer provide orientation. The need that follows is therefore not only political or material, but deeply psychological. People must reconstruct a moral order capable of making sense of what has happened and that reconstruction happens through narrative.

As de Weijer argues, communities gradually create new stories that explain who they are, what has happened to them and how they now relate to others. Those stories provide a renewed sense of psychological security. They become, in her words, "a coping mechanism," an essential response to collective disorientation. Like individual trauma

narratives, they help restore coherence after profound disruption. But unlike individual stories, they do not remain confined to personal experience. They become embedded in institutions, commemorative practices, education, political discourse and cultural memory, eventually shaping how entire societies understand reality.

This process also explains why narratives can become extraordinarily resilient. Because they respond to a genuine psychological need, they cannot simply be discarded when new information becomes available. “Dislodging it,” de Weijer cautions, “is really, really dangerous for people, because it is the renewed ground underneath their feet.” The very stories that initially helped communities survive trauma can, over time, become difficult to question precisely because they have become intertwined with identity itself. What began as a mechanism of survival may gradually evolve into a framework that constrains new ways of seeing the world.

As de Weijer explains why societies need narratives after violence, Alison Castel helps us understand how those narratives actually function. One of the most illuminating moments in the discussion came when she challenged one of the most common ways of speaking about stories in peacebuilding. Too often, she suggested, narratives are treated simply as collections of individual testimonies.

We encourage storytelling, collect personal experiences and assume that hearing enough stories will naturally foster empathy, yet this understanding misses something essential. Narratives are not simply stories but in fact form entire systems of meaning-making. “When we talk about narrative systems,” Castel explains, “these stories actually do work in the world.” They organise experience and determine which events become connected, which actors are understood as victims, perpetrators or bystanders, and which emotions appear legitimate in response. Most importantly, narrative systems establish who and what is considered legitimate. They shape not only what societies remember but also what kinds of political action become imaginable.

This distinction profoundly changes how we think about memorialisation. If narratives are systems rather than isolated stories, then remembrance cannot be reduced to preserving historical facts alone. Every commemorative practice, every museum exhibition, every school curriculum and every public anniversary participates in shaping a broader narrative landscape. Some experiences become central while others remain marginal. Certain identities are affirmed while others struggle for recognition. Some forms of political action appear natural and inevitable, while others become almost impossible to imagine. The importance of this insight becomes particularly clear when societies



experience mass violence. Castel argues that traumatic events, especially in the immediate aftermath of violence, tend to simplify narratives dramatically. “The plots are linear,” she explains. “The morality is super clear.” Communities divide the world into innocent and guilty, good and evil, victim and perpetrator. Such simplification is not necessarily the result of political manipulation, at least not initially, but an understandable attempt to restore coherence after experiences that have shattered ordinary ways of making sense of the world. The problem arises when those simplified narratives become permanent.

Castel’s description of this process is particularly striking because it avoids easy moral judgement. She does not dismiss simplified narratives as irrational or malicious. On the contrary, she recognises them as psychologically protective. “People are trying to make sense of something that is completely overwhelming,” she explains. “You want to cling to something that makes sense.” Complexity, after all, introduces ambiguity and demands uncertainty precisely when communities are searching most desperately for certainty. Simplified narratives therefore provide emotional stability at moments when almost everything else has become unstable.

As those narratives become repeated through families, institutions, political speeches and commemorative practices, they gradually acquire the

appearance of common sense. They no longer feel like one interpretation among many but like reality itself. Experiences that do not fit the dominant narrative quietly disappear from public consciousness. Nuance becomes increasingly difficult to express. Alternative interpretations appear not simply controversial but almost unintelligible.

This, perhaps more than anything else discussed during the webinar, helps explain why memorialisation remains such a profoundly political practice even when it appears merely to concern the past. The struggle is never only over what happened but also over which stories become sufficiently powerful to define the moral and political horizons within which societies continue to live. If collective trauma reshapes the narratives through which societies understand themselves, an obvious question follows. How can those narratives ever change?

For practitioners working in transitional justice, memorialisation and peacebuilding, this question is often framed in deceptively simple terms: How do we counter harmful narratives? How do we replace exclusionary stories with more inclusive ones? How do we persuade communities to adopt more accurate understandings of the past? Throughout the conversation, however, both Frauke de Weijer and Alison Castel gently resist that language. The difficulty, they suggest, is that it



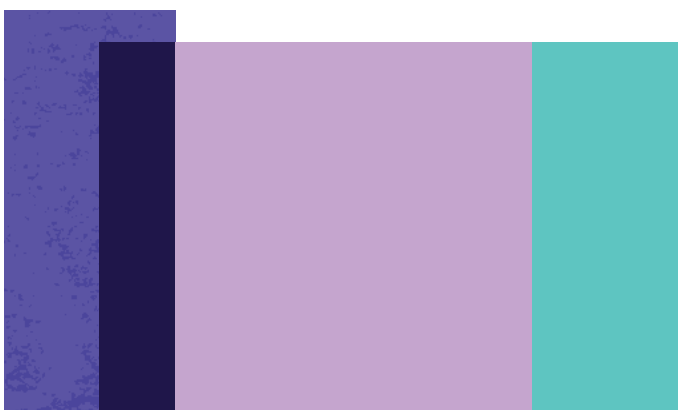
continues to imagine narratives as positions in an argument, as though one story might simply be substituted for another. But narratives do not function like opinions and are not easily exchanged once better evidence becomes available. They are the frameworks through which people organise experience itself and attempting to remove them too abruptly can feel like a direct assault on identity.

That is why de Weijer repeatedly returns to the importance of approaching narratives with humility rather than confrontation. If collective narratives emerged as ways of restoring meaning after profound disorientation, then challenging them requires recognising the emotional work they continue to perform. “People hold on to these narratives because they make sense of the world,” she explains. “If you simply take that away without offering another way of understanding their experience, you are removing the very thing that gives them stability.”

This does not mean harmful narratives should remain unchallenged but that transformation does not begin from asking how to defeat existing narratives, but that practitioners might first ask how societies can gradually become capable of holding more than one story at the same time. That distinction may appear modest, but it has the potential to fundamentally change the understanding of the purpose of memorialisation.

For much of the post-conflict field, success has often been imagined as the gradual emergence of a shared narrative about the past. The aspiration is understandable. Shared narratives appear to promise social cohesion, mutual recognition and reconciliation. Yet both speakers caution against assuming that democratic societies require historical unanimity. Diversity of experience is not itself a problem. Indeed, plural societies inevitably remember differently. The challenge is not that different narratives exist, but that some become so closed, so morally absolute and so politically dominant that they leave no space for complexity, ambiguity or coexistence.

It is here that Alison Castel introduces one of the most compelling ideas in the discussion. Rather than speaking about replacing narratives, she speaks about complexifying them. Complexity in this context does not ask communities to abandon their own suffering or relinquish deeply held memories or the victims to dilute the reality of violence they experienced. Instead, it creates conditions in which people become able to recognise that their own story exists alongside other stories that are equally real, equally painful and equally deserving of acknowledgement. Complexity enlarges rather than diminishes understanding. It allows people to retain the integrity of their own experience while becoming capable of recognising experiences that previously remained outside the



boundaries of their narrative world. As Castel suggests, the goal is not consensus but greater narrative capacity, the ability to inhabit a world in which certainty gives way to curiosity and inherited assumptions become open to reflection rather than merely repetition.

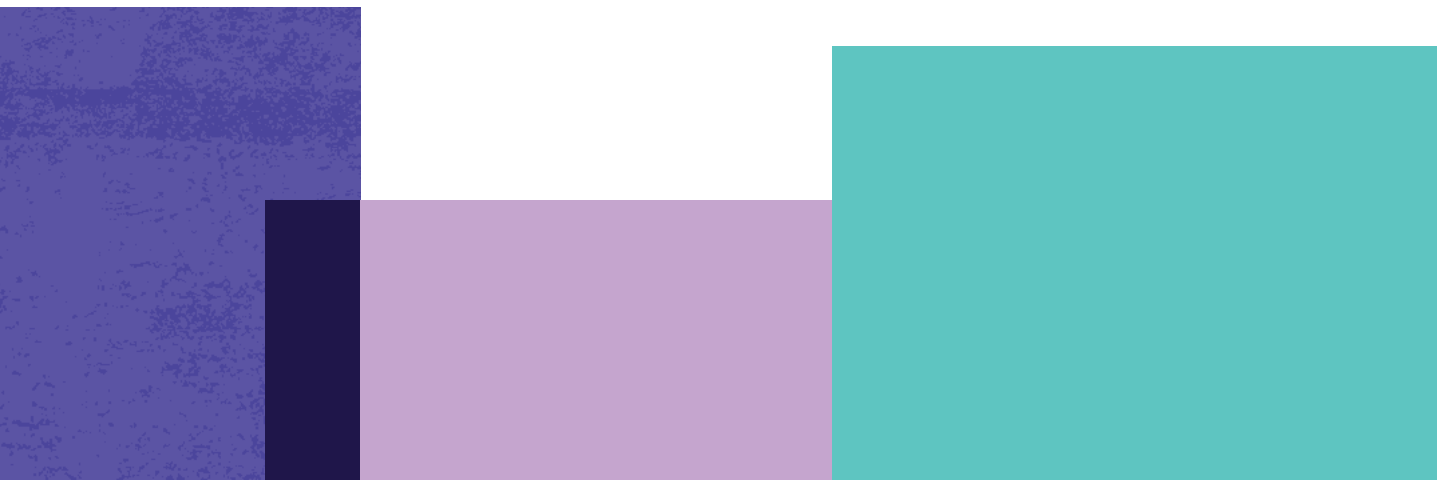
That process is neither quick nor comfortable as illustrated by one of the most striking concepts introduced during the webinar, which the speakers describe as “memory prisons.” The phrase captures something immediately recognisable across societies emerging from conflict, especially those in the Western Balkans. Narratives that once protected communities from chaos can gradually become structures that limit their ability to imagine alternative futures. People remain enclosed not because they are physically prevented from leaving, but because the narrative itself defines the boundaries of what appears thinkable. Different experiences become invisible and different futures become almost impossible to imagine. The metaphor is powerful precisely because it shifts attention away from individual attitudes towards the systems that shape them. Memory prisons are not maintained only through political speeches or commemorative ceremonies. They are reproduced through school curricula, media, family conversations, public rituals and everyday assumptions about who “we” are and who “they” must inevitably remain. They become so familiar that

they cease to appear as narratives at all but simply feel like reality.

How, then, does one leave such a prison? The speakers offer no simple formula, and perhaps that is one of the conversation’s greatest strengths. Rather than presenting inclusive memorialisation as a set of techniques capable of transforming societies, they describe it as a practice of creating conditions under which reflection becomes possible. That is why both de Weijer and Castel place such emphasis on dialogue, participation and local ownership.

These concepts have become familiar within peacebuilding, yet the webinar gives them renewed significance. Participation is not valuable merely because it makes memorialisation more representative, but it matters because narratives themselves cannot become more complex through passive consumption. People must experience complexity and participate in conversations where multiple perspectives remain present without requiring immediate resolution. They must discover that acknowledging another person’s suffering does not erase their own.

In this sense, memorialisation becomes much more than an act of remembrance but it becomes an exercise in democratic practice. Participants learn not only about the past but about the habits of mind that democracy itself requires: listening



without immediate judgement, holding competing truths in tension, resisting premature certainty and remaining open to experiences that challenge one's own assumptions. These capacities are rarely acquired through political debate alone. They emerge through repeated encounters in which people gradually discover that complexity need not threaten identity. They remind us that before societies become polarised politically, they often become simplified narratively. Before democratic space contracts institutionally, it contracts imaginatively. The stories communities tell after violence gradually establish the emotional and moral boundaries within which politics later unfolds. If those stories remain rigid, democracy itself becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. If they become capable of greater complexity, societies begin recovering something much deeper than historical understanding. They begin recovering their capacity to imagine living together differently.

That may ultimately be what distinguishes inclusive memorialisation from more traditional approaches to remembrance. It does not ask communities to forget difficult histories, nor does it seek to replace one official narrative with another. Instead, it creates opportunities for people to become more reflective about the stories they already inhabit, recognising that every narrative illuminates certain experiences while inevitably leaving others in shadow.

In the end, perhaps this is why the conversation feels so relevant far beyond the Western Balkans. Every society emerging from violence must tell stories in order to survive. The question is not whether those stories will exist. The question is whether they will become walls that separate communities indefinitely or bridges that allow them, however cautiously, to begin imagining futures that are no longer imprisoned by the certainties of the past.



In Conversation with Mark Freeman: Can Inclusive Memorialisation Reduce Polarisation?

In societies shaped by war, memory is never neutral. It lives in monuments and museums, in school textbooks and political speeches, in graffiti, commemorations, and silences. Across the Western Balkans, where the legacies of the conflicts of the 1990s remain deeply embedded in political and social life, memorialisation has become one of the last truly “alive” arenas of transitional justice, a contested space where societies continue to negotiate what happened, who suffered, who bears responsibility, and what kind of future remains possible.

But what happens when memory itself becomes a source of division? This question lay at the heart of the latest conversation in the British Council webinar series *Different Memories, Shared Futures: Towards Inclusive Memorialisation in the Western Balkans*, featuring Mark Freeman, Executive

Director of the Institute for Integrated Transitions, in discussion with Refik Hodžić. Drawing on decades of work in transitional justice, conflict resolution, and democratic transformation, Freeman explored the increasingly urgent nexus between memorialisation, transitional justice, and political polarisation. The conversation arrived at a moment of growing anxiety not only in the Western Balkans, but globally. Across democracies and post-conflict societies alike, political actors are increasingly mobilising memory as a tool of division. Competing narratives of the past are no longer confined to academic debate or commemorative rituals; they are becoming central instruments in wider struggles over identity, legitimacy, and power. Freeman describes polarisation as a “hyper-problem”: a problem so fundamental that failure to address it undermines the possibility of solving almost everything else.



“Polarisation,” he explained, “refers to poles or polarities. This implies distance, not proximity.” But division alone is not enough to constitute polarisation. The second ingredient is radicalisation: the tendency of groups to increasingly romanticise themselves while demonising others. Combined, these dynamics create what Freeman called a “centrifugal effect”, a shrinking of the middle ground and a hardening of identities.

For societies emerging from mass violence, this dynamic poses a profound challenge. Transitional justice mechanisms - trials, truth commissions, reparations, memorials - were often designed with the hope of helping societies move toward reconciliation or democratic stability. Yet Freeman argued that transitional justice itself has sometimes become disconnected from the broader political realities it seeks to influence.

Over time, he suggested, transitional justice evolved into what he called a “free-floating exercise,” insulated from politics and treated as though justice processes could somehow exist outside social contestation. “I take a different view,” Freeman said. “If they are conducted in a vacuum, disconnected from the realities of the society and political system, they are unlikely to be sustainable. In fact, they may even contribute to polarization.”

This observation is particularly resonant in the Western Balkans, where many formal transitional justice processes

have stalled or lost legitimacy, while battles over memory continue to intensify. Courts may issue judgments, but competing communities frequently reject them. Truths established in legal forums do not necessarily become socially shared truths. Instead, official narratives are increasingly challenged by alternative forms of memorialisation, some inclusive and reflective, others openly exclusionary.

In this environment, memorialisation occupies a uniquely sensitive position. Freeman framed memorialisation fundamentally as a form of speech. In democratic societies, he argued, memory contestation is not only inevitable but potentially healthy. “Memory is a battleground,” he said. “If those battles are peaceful, they can be healthy.” This perspective pushes against the assumption that societies emerging from violence must eventually arrive at a single, unified narrative of the past. Instead, Freeman suggested that democratic resilience may depend precisely on the ability to tolerate disagreement over memory, provided such disagreement does not cross into incitement or dehumanisation. The distinction is crucial. Throughout the conversation, participants repeatedly returned to the difficult question of where societies should draw the line between freedom of expression and harmful forms of memorialisation. In the Western Balkans, this dilemma is far from theoretical. Memorials celebrating convicted war criminals, denial of



atrocities, and ethnically exclusive commemorations remain deeply contentious realities.

Nikolas Pantelick, a fellow with the Post-Conflict Research Center in Bosnia and Herzegovina, posed perhaps the central moral dilemma of the discussion: can memorialisation truly be considered “peaceful” when victims experience the glorification of perpetrators as a continuation of violence?

Freeman acknowledged the complexity directly. Drawing parallels to debates around hate speech, he argued that societies must carefully negotiate these boundaries themselves, often shaped by their own histories of trauma and violence. “I am Jewish,” he noted. “Would I want to see a monument to Nazis in front of my house? Absolutely not.” Yet he cautioned against overly simplistic solutions rooted in censorship alone. “The way to respond to speech we don’t like is with more speech, not censorship.”

The conversation repeatedly circled back to the tension between democratic openness and the dangers of polarising narratives. What happens when states themselves become active “memory police,” controlling who has the right to remember and how? What happens when political leaders deliberately cultivate division through selective narratives of victimhood and heroism?

For Freeman, the answer lies partly in

recognising that polarisation does not emerge only because of “conflict entrepreneurs” - political actors who manipulate division - but because broader social conditions allow those strategies to resonate. “We cannot simply blame the individuals,” he argued. “We must also examine the broader societal and political environment that allows polarisation to flourish.”

That insight has profound implications for memorialisation work. If memory practices are embedded within wider political cultures, then memorialisation cannot be approached merely as symbolic or cultural work. It becomes inseparable from questions of democratic space, civic freedoms, and social trust. Freeman argued that one sign of civic health is precisely the existence of contestation against “official memory”. “If we end up in a world of sacred truths,” he warned, “that becomes problematic.”

This does not mean abandoning facts or accountability. Rather, it reflects an understanding that societies process traumatic histories not only through legal determinations but through emotionally and politically charged narratives that evolve over time. Memorialisation becomes part of an ongoing democratic negotiation rather than a final destination. Yet such openness also carries risks, especially for those willing to challenge dominant narratives within their own communities.



One of the most striking themes of the discussion was Freeman's emphasis on "risk-takers" - individuals who publicly question their own group's certainties or engage across deeply polarised divides. These figures, he argued, are indispensable to depolarisation, but they are also exceptionally vulnerable. "Most people will not take major risks," Freeman observed. "Their reputations may be destroyed. They may be threatened, and their families may be threatened with harm."

In highly polarised societies, dissent within one's own in-group can carry enormous social and political costs. Individuals who challenge dominant memory narratives often face accusations of betrayal, harassment, or ostracism. Across the Western Balkans, journalists, activists, artists, and scholars who attempt to complicate nationalist narratives frequently encounter precisely these pressures. Freeman argued that societies serious about depolarisation must therefore invest in protecting such people legally, politically, and socially.

At the same time, he stressed that public confrontation alone is rarely enough. Much of the real work of depolarisation, he suggested, happens quietly: through back channels, trust-building, private engagement, and what he described as forms of "civic diplomacy."

"If the goal is to see someone publicly dissent against their in-group," Freeman

explained, "you need to build the path and the bridge toward that." This insight carries important implications for memorialisation initiatives in the region. Inclusive memorialisation cannot simply be imposed through institutional declarations or symbolic gestures. It requires sustained work to create conditions in which people can encounter complexity without immediately perceiving it as existential threat.

That may involve small confidence-building measures, local initiatives, artistic collaborations, or informal dialogues that rarely make headlines. It may require creating spaces where individuals can privately question inherited narratives before doing so publicly. And it may mean accepting that progress is often nonlinear and fragile. Throughout the discussion, Freeman returned repeatedly to the importance of realism. Transitional justice, he argued, cannot afford to operate as though the global political context has not fundamentally changed. "The external conditions needed for an embrace of quality transitional justice have been dramatically weakened," he said. "They are now at their lowest point since the field's origins."

Rising authoritarianism, democratic erosion, geopolitical instability, and renewed identity politics have all transformed the landscape in which memory and justice operate. Yet Freeman rejected the idea that this means transitional justice has become



obsolete. Instead, he offered a metaphor: “When the music changes, the dance must also change.”

The challenge, then, is not whether societies should abandon the goals of transitional justice, but how those goals must adapt to contemporary realities. For Freeman, this means moving away from overly legalistic or closure-oriented models and toward approaches that are politically aware, socially embedded, and sensitive to polarisation dynamics.

It also means recognising that memorialisation is not peripheral to democratic life, but central to it. In deeply divided societies, memory can harden identities and deepen resentment. But it can also create openings for empathy, reflection, and complexity. Memorialisation can reinforce exclusionary myths, or it can

invite societies to confront uncomfortable truths without collapsing into new forms of violence.

The difference may ultimately depend less on achieving consensus than on preserving the democratic space in which disagreement remains possible. That is perhaps the central lesson emerging from the Different Memories, Shared Futures conversation series: that inclusive memorialisation is not about erasing difference, nor about enforcing singular truths. It is about building societies resilient enough to live with contested memories without allowing those contests to become pathways back to dehumanisation and conflict. In the Western Balkans, where the past remains intensely present, that task may be among the most difficult, and most necessary, democratic projects of all.



In Conversation with Professor Ann Rigney: Can Memory Be a Source of Hope?

Across societies emerging from conflict, memory is often understood as a duty owed to the past. It preserves the names of those who were killed, documents atrocities, honours survivors and warns future generations of the consequences of hatred and violence. Museums, memorials and commemorative ceremonies all serve an essential purpose: ensuring that suffering is neither denied nor forgotten. For decades, this understanding has shaped memorialisation around the world, especially in societies recovering from genocide, war and mass atrocities. Its moral compass has been clear and compelling: remember, so that it never happens again.

Yet, as conflicts continue to cast long shadows over the present, another question has begun to emerge. If remembrance is focused primarily on preserving trauma, what kind of future

does it allow societies to imagine? Can memory do more than warn against repeating the past? Can it also help people imagine different ways of living together?

These questions formed the heart of one of the most thought-provoking conversations in the British Council webinar series *Different Memories, Shared Futures: Towards Inclusive Memorialisation in the Western Balkans*. In dialogue with Refik Hodžić, Professor Ann Rigney, one of the world's leading scholars of memory studies and author of *Remembering Hope*, offered a quietly transformative way of thinking about remembrance. Rather than treating memory as a repository of loss, she invited participants to consider memory as a creative force capable of shaping society's capacity to imagine and build a different future.



Rigney began by clarifying an idea that sits at the centre of her work: hope is not optimism. In public discourse the two are often used interchangeably, but for her they describe fundamentally different attitudes towards history and human agency. “Hope is not optimism... It is against inevitability, against the sense that the course of history is laid out, and basically there’s nothing we can do. Hope is a sense that there is something we can do. There is a space of possibility.”

This distinction is more than philosophical. It can change how we understand memorialisation itself. Optimism waits for circumstances to improve; hope creates a disposition to act despite uncertainty and despite the knowledge that previous attempts may have failed. It is rooted not in confidence about the future, but in the refusal to accept that the future has already been written.

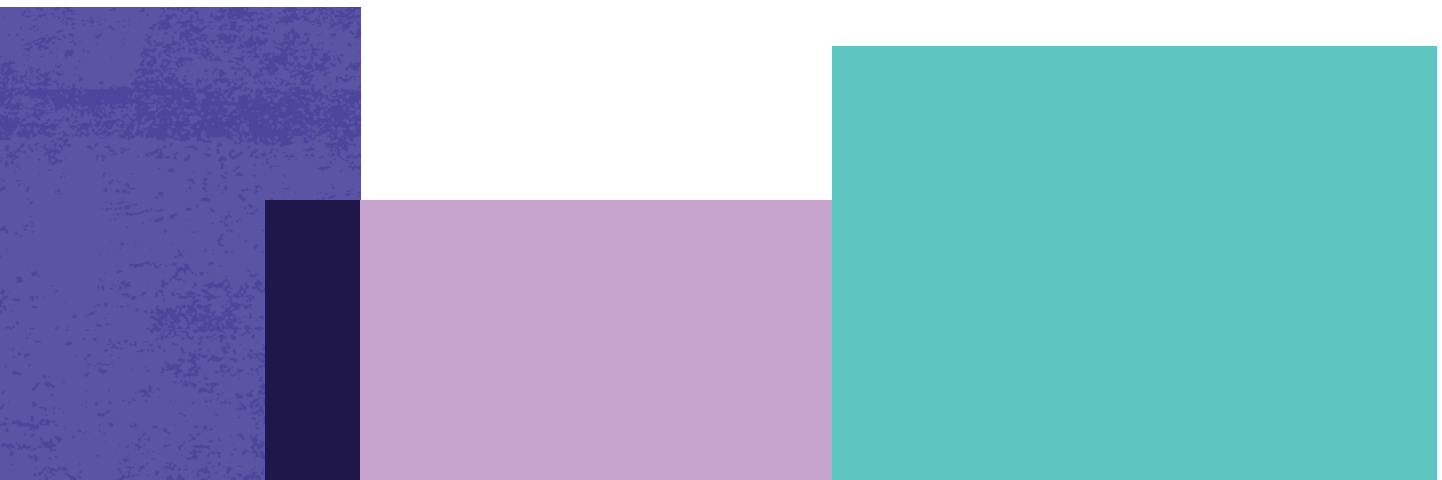
For societies living with the aftermath of mass violence, where history often feels overwhelming and inherited trauma shapes political life across generations, this understanding opens an entirely different way of approaching memory. The conversation quickly moved beyond hope itself to an even more fundamental question: what exactly is memory? Much contemporary memorialisation is built around the language of preservation. We speak of preserving memory as though memory were an object—a monument, an archive or an historic building—that simply needs to be

protected from decay. Rigney challenged that assumption at its core. “Memory is not a thing that can be preserved... Memory is a relationship between the past and the present, and that relationship is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated as the present changes.”

This deceptively simple observation carries profound implications. If memory is not an object but a relationship, then memorialisation cannot simply be about safeguarding inherited narratives. It becomes an active social practice through which individuals and communities continually reinterpret the past in light of changing present realities and future aspirations.

It is for this reason that Rigney prefers the expression memory work rather than memory itself. Remembering is not passive storage but something societies actively work on. Stories are retold, symbols acquire new meanings, commemorations evolve, and new generations ask different questions of the same events. Memory is therefore never complete; it remains a living conversation between past, present and future.

As Rigney explained, memory studies itself has increasingly moved in this direction over the past two decades. Rather than thinking only about how the present relates to the past, scholars have begun to understand memory as connecting “past, present and future in a constantly shifting relationship.”



That shift becomes particularly significant when considering one of the defining paradigms of post-war remembrance. For generations, the moral language of memorialisation has been organised around the imperative of Never Again. Emerging from the horrors of the twentieth century, particularly the Holocaust and later genocides, this framework has rightly insisted on confronting atrocity and acknowledging victims. Its influence has shaped museums, memorials, education and transitional justice across the world. Rigney does not question its historical importance. Rather, she asks what happens when such a powerful moral injunction becomes fixed, unquestioned and disconnected from changing realities.

“There is always a danger,” she observed during the discussion, “that memory becomes monumental.” Once memory is frozen into an unchanging form, societies begin treating it as something already settled rather than something requiring continual engagement. The consequences extend beyond how societies remember the past. They also affect how they imagine the future. “The future we begin to imagine is a non-repetition of the past... But it is still a negative framing of the future. It’s not exactly mobilizing. It’s not something you will get out of bed for in the morning.”

This insight speaks directly to many post-conflict societies, including those across the Western Balkans, where

memorialisation remains the most active element of transitional justice long after criminal prosecutions and institutional reforms have slowed. Public memory has understandably concentrated on acknowledging suffering and resisting denial. Yet when remembrance becomes defined exclusively through trauma, the future risks becoming equally constrained. Societies learn what they must never become again, but struggle to imagine positively what they might yet become.

Throughout the conversation, Hodžić returned repeatedly to this dilemma through the experience of practitioners working in Bosnia and Herzegovina and elsewhere in the region. How can memorialisation honour victims without reducing entire communities to permanent identities of victimhood? Rigney’s response was among the most compelling moments of the discussion because it did not seek to diminish suffering. Instead, she proposed expanding the stories through which suffering is remembered. “Victims don’t necessarily have to be only seen as victims. They can be connected to different evocations which are linked to their being as human beings.” The distinction is subtle but transformative. People whose lives were destroyed by violence should never be remembered only through the violence inflicted upon them. They were also parents, children, neighbours, artists, workers, friends and citizens. They had ambitions, political convictions, humour,



passions and dreams. Reducing them solely to the circumstances of their death risks diminishing the very humanity that memorialisation seeks to restore.

Rigney illustrated this through examples of cultural works that invite audiences to remember victims not simply as casualties but as people who once lived fully. Such approaches do not weaken remembrance. On the contrary, they deepen it by restoring complexity and individuality where violence sought precisely to erase both. They also open possibilities for empathy that transcend ethnic or political divisions because they begin not with competing identities but with a shared recognition of human life itself.

This shift also points towards another, equally important question. If societies have long spoken about the inheritance of trauma, is it also possible to think about the inheritance of agency? Can memory transmit not only suffering across generations, but also courage, solidarity and the capacity to act? It is precisely here that the title of Rigney's book, *Remembering Hope*, acquires its deeper meaning. Hope, she argues, can itself become culturally transmissible and not because history guarantees success, but because stories can carry forward the aspirations, commitments and moral imagination of those who came before us.

Stories do not transmit only information but also emotional dispositions. Through literature, theatre, music, film and other

forms of cultural memory work, societies inherit ways of feeling about the world as much as they inherit historical knowledge. They learn not only what happened, but what previous generations believed was worth striving for.

Rigney described this as creating the conditions for “the contagion of hope”, the possibility that hope itself can be passed from one generation to another. Crucially, this does not depend on historical success. Many struggles for justice, equality or peace ended in defeat. Many people whose courage we now celebrate never lived to see the societies they hoped to create. Yet their aspirations remain meaningful precisely because memory can reconnect later generations not only with what happened, but with what those earlier generations imagined might still become possible.

As Rigney explained, “by telling stories in a different way, we can reconnect with the hopes and aspirations of earlier generations and do so in a form which carries positive affect.” In other words, memory need not transmit only trauma. It can also transmit resilience, civic commitment and the belief that history always contains unrealised possibilities.

The conversation naturally turned to the role of culture and the arts in making such forms of remembrance possible. Drawing on experiences from the *Different Memories, Shared Futures* project, Hodžić described one particularly moving example from his



hometown of Prijedor, where a theatre performance was staged inside the buildings of the former Keraterm detention camp. For many survivors in the audience, it was the first time they had been able to enter the site since the war. The performance transformed a place long associated with silence and exclusion into a temporary space of collective remembrance, where the names of detainees who had been tortured and killed were spoken aloud into the night.

Experiences like this prompted an important question. Are practitioners sufficiently recognising the transformative potential of artistic interventions in memorialisation? Rigney's answer was immediate, though characteristically nuanced. Rather than speaking simply about art, she preferred to speak about creativity and imagination. "The real crux of the matter," she observed, "is how do you go from the idea of memory as an inheritance to a space where you can reconfigure your relationship to the past, present and future?"

That distinction is significant. Art matters not because it decorates memorialisation, but because it refuses closure. Unlike monuments, artistic works remain open to reinterpretation. They invite audiences into dialogue rather than presenting finished conclusions. Theatre, literature, film and storytelling do not simply preserve memory; they continually reshape the

emotional and imaginative relationship between past and present.

Rigney was equally careful not to instrumentalise artists. Creativity, she reminded the audience, cannot be commanded. The responsibility of artists is not to produce officially sanctioned narratives or serve predetermined political purposes, but to create work that is original, intellectually honest and capable of opening new ways of seeing. It is precisely because art resists predictability that it can create spaces for imagining futures that conventional political discourse often cannot.

This understanding also shaped one of the discussion's most revealing exchanges on inclusive memorialisation itself. Asked how she would advise creating monuments designed to embody hope and shared action, Rigney offered a surprisingly cautious response.

"I think we've too many monuments," she admitted. "They tend to very quickly get out of date." Her concern was not with public remembrance itself, but with the tendency of monuments to fix meaning permanently. Hope, by contrast, is inherently unfinished. "I'm not sure you could have a monument to hope," she reflected. "Hope is about saying that the world is not yet finished... we can still complete the world."

Instead of monumental certainty, she argued for forms of memorialisation that remain open, participatory and capable of evolving alongside society itself

through theatre, installations, storytelling, public debate and other practices that encourage continual engagement rather than symbolic closure.

As the conversation unfolded, these reflections converged around the central question embedded in the title of the British Council project itself: Different Memories, Shared Futures. Must societies develop shared memories before they can build shared futures?

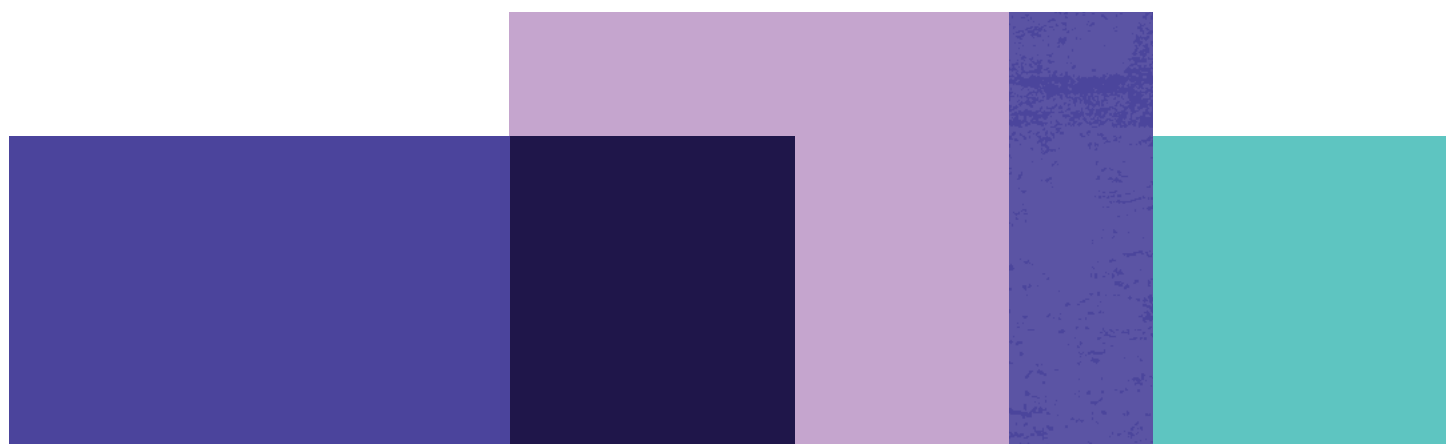
For decades, many approaches to post-conflict reconciliation have implicitly assumed that they must. The hope has often been that societies will eventually converge around a common understanding of the past, creating the basis for democratic coexistence. Rigney gently challenged this assumption by placing it in historical perspective. “The idea that every nation has to have a shared memory,” she explained, “is very much a nineteenth-century idea linked to the rise of nationalism.” The expectation that every political community should possess one authoritative historical narrative has deep roots in the history of nation-building. Yet contemporary democratic societies may require something different.

“I think now that we’re 150 years beyond Renan... we can question the idea that we need a unified memory in order to create a shared future.” Rather than insisting upon one shared memory, Rigney suggested that plural memories may coexist within a shared civic

framework. Indeed, she proposed turning the conventional relationship between memory and the future upside down. “There might be room,” she observed, “to think about how we can create the conditions for the future, and that would help us to sort out the memory.”

The implications of this inversion are profound. Much memorialisation practice assumes that societies must first resolve their disagreements about the past before they can move forward together. Rigney suggests the opposite may often be true. Shared futures are not necessarily the outcome of shared memories. Sometimes it is precisely through working together in the present, building institutions, solving practical problems and developing civic trust, that societies gradually acquire the confidence to live with different memories without allowing those differences to become sources of permanent political division.

This perspective also informed her reflections on polarisation. While memory work can undoubtedly contribute to reducing social divisions, Rigney resisted simplistic assumptions that remembrance automatically leads to reconciliation. She pointed to experiences in Northern Ireland where some reconciliation initiatives unintentionally reinforced the very divisions they sought to overcome by institutionalising separate identities and parallel narratives. The challenge, she



suggested, is not simply to balance competing memories but to recover forgotten histories of coexistence as stories that remind societies that conflict has never been the only possible way of living together. Such reflections also introduced an important note of humility. Throughout the discussion, Rigney repeatedly cautioned against expecting too much from memory alone.

Many contemporary conflicts invoke history, but their underlying causes often lie in present-day inequalities, political exclusion, poor governance or social injustice. Memory can illuminate these dynamics, but it cannot resolve them by itself. As she observed, memory activism should never become disconnected from broader forms of civic engagement. Campaigns for historical recognition need not compete with efforts to address environmental degradation, democratic participation or social inequality. On the contrary, they become stronger when connected to wider struggles for a more just society.

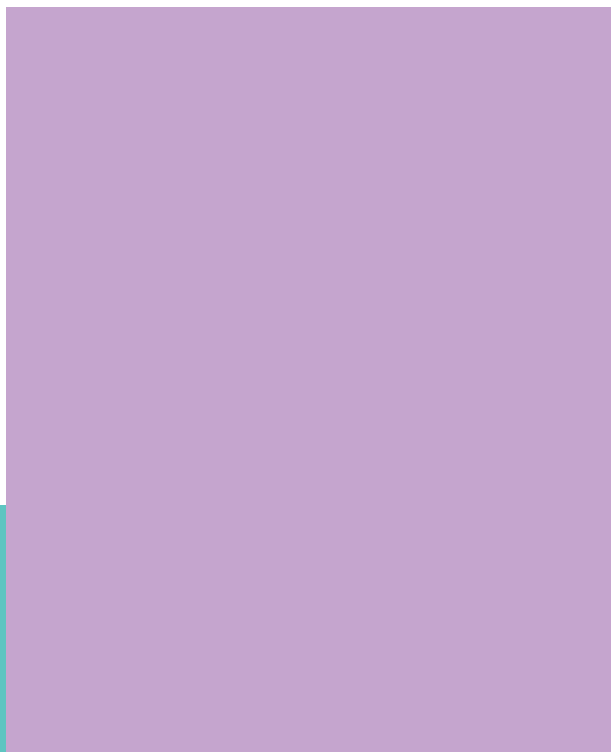
Taken together, the conversation offered something more ambitious than a new approach to memorialisation. It proposed a different philosophy of memory itself. Across post-conflict societies, remembrance will always carry the responsibility of acknowledging suffering, resisting denial and demanding justice. None of this becomes less important. Yet if memory is understood only as

preservation, only as the safeguarding of trauma, it risks narrowing society's imagination to avoiding the mistakes of yesterday.

Rigney's work invites another possibility: Memory can also become a resource for imagining futures that have not yet existed. It can recover forgotten traditions of solidarity, acts of civic courage and histories of coexistence that expand rather than constrain political imagination. It can remind societies not only what they lost, but also what earlier generations hoped to create, even when those hopes remained unrealised.

Perhaps that is the deepest meaning of remembering hope. It is not an invitation to soften the pursuit of justice or to move prematurely beyond trauma. It is an invitation to refuse the idea that the past alone determines the limits of the future.

As Rigney put it so simply towards the end of the conversation, hope is ultimately about recognising that "the world is not yet finished." For societies emerging from violence, there may be no more important lesson that memorialisation can offer.



In Conversation with Professor Denisa Kostovicova: Reclaiming the Politics of Memory



The question is not how to take memory out of politics. The question is how to create a different relationship between memory and politics.

Denisa Kostovicova

For much of the past three decades, conversations about memory in the Western Balkans have revolved around a deceptively simple assumption: that memory belongs primarily to the realm of ethics. Remembering the victims, documenting atrocities, preserving evidence, acknowledging suffering and preventing denial have all been understood as moral imperatives that should somehow remain above politics. Transitional justice institutions, human rights organisations and memorialisation practitioners have often approached memory as something that ought to be

protected from political interference rather than recognised as an arena of political contestation in its own right. However, the lived experience tells a different story.

While courts have established facts, civil society organisations have documented crimes and countless local initiatives have worked to honour victims with dignity, political elites have continued to mobilise their constituencies using remarkably similar narratives of victimhood, existential threat and selective remembrance that emerged



during the wars of the 1990s. If anything, those narratives have become more sophisticated over time, increasingly intertwined with electoral politics, media ecosystems, educational systems and the everyday functioning of post-conflict states.

It was precisely this apparent contradiction that formed the starting point of the final webinar in the British Council series *Different Memories, Shared Futures: Towards Inclusive Memorialisation in the Western Balkans*. After previous conversations explored collective trauma, polarisation, hope and the transformative potential of memorialisation, the discussion with Professor Denisa Kostovicova of the London School of Economics turned towards perhaps the most difficult question of all: why has memory become such a powerful political resource, and what would it take to reclaim it?

Kostovicova's answer begins with a deceptively simple observation. Memory does not become political accidentally, but it is made political. "The key," she argues, "is to understand that memory has been successfully removed from the realm of morality and ethics, which is where societies honour those who suffered, and placed into the realm of politics." Once that shift occurs, memory ceases to function merely as a way of acknowledging the past and it begins to generate political benefits. Those benefits are symbolic, certainly, but they are also profoundly material.

That distinction may appear subtle, yet it fundamentally changes how we understand both memory politics and the challenges facing memorialisation practitioners. Much public debate about the Western Balkans has focused on symbols: competing commemorations, contested monuments, disputed historical narratives and public acts of denial. These are highly visible manifestations of memory politics. Kostovicova invites us to look beneath the surface.

The real power of memory, she argues, lies in its relationship with systems of governance. Political elites do not instrumentalise the past simply because they are interested in historical interpretation. They do so because memory helps sustain political and economic orders that benefit them. Narratives of collective victimhood, existential insecurity and permanent external threat become mechanisms through which attention is diverted from corruption, clientelism and democratic stagnation. They provide emotional legitimacy for systems that often fail to deliver materially to the very citizens they claim to protect.

Viewed through this lens, memory politics cannot be separated from what Kostovicova describes as the political economy of post-conflict reconstruction. Ethnic mobilisation and selective remembrance are not parallel phenomena existing alongside governance; they are deeply embedded within it. "The more



strategic the use of memory becomes,” she observes, “the more intertwined it is with the political economy of transition and peacebuilding.”

This helps explain one of the enduring paradoxes of politics in the Western Balkans: citizens repeatedly vote for political representatives whom they often recognise as deeply implicated in systems of corruption that ultimately harm their own interests. Viewed purely through the lens of rational economic choice, such behaviour appears almost inexplicable. But when memory politics enters the picture, the paradox becomes more understandable. Political elites persuade citizens that the survival of their community depends less on competent governance than on maintaining vigilance against historical enemies. Material interests become subordinated to symbolic fears. Memory, in other words, becomes a form of political insurance. The implications of this argument extend far beyond the Balkans. Across many societies, political actors increasingly invoke memories of past injustice, national humiliation or historical victimhood as powerful instruments of mobilisation. But Kostovicova reminds us that in post-conflict societies these narratives possess an additional emotional intensity because they remain closely connected to lived experience, intergenerational trauma and unresolved questions of justice.

For practitioners working in

memorialisation, this diagnosis also poses an uncomfortable question. If memory is already deeply political, what does it mean to insist that memorialisation itself should remain apolitical?

For years, much of the international transitional justice and donor community encouraged courts, human rights organisations and civil society groups to maintain strict political neutrality. Memory work was expected to focus on victims, legal facts and universal human rights principles while consciously avoiding political contestation. At the same time, however, political elites faced no comparable restraint. They continued to mobilise memory aggressively in pursuit of electoral advantage.

The result, as the discussion suggested, has been a profoundly unequal contest. “The entire framing is misplaced,” Kostovicova argues. “Even transitional justice is about transition. What is transition if it is not political?” Civil society itself, she reminds, is inherently political. Institutions are political. The question, therefore, cannot be how to remove memory from politics altogether. “The key challenge,” she explains, “is to reconfigure that relationship. Not to have exclusive memory linked with exclusive politics, but different kinds of memory linked with different kinds of politics.” This represents a subtle but profound shift in perspective. Rather than



imagining memorialisation as existing outside politics, Kostovicova asks us to imagine a politics capable of sustaining more inclusive forms of memory. That distinction matters because it changes the role of practitioners. Their task is no longer simply to protect memory from political interference. It is to participate consciously in shaping political cultures where more inclusive understandings of the past can flourish. One of the most striking moments in the conversation came when she challenged the widespread assumption that societies in the region have uniformly internalised exclusive nationalist narratives. Survey research conducted as part of her own comparative work in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo suggests a far more nuanced reality. When ordinary citizens were asked whether members of their own group had committed war crimes, significant minorities across all communities acknowledged that they had. The numbers varied, but nowhere did every respondent deny wrongdoing by their own side.

For Kostovicova, these findings point towards something often overlooked. Perhaps the problem is not only political mobilisation, but also political acquiescence. If sizeable numbers of citizens privately reject simplified nationalist narratives yet rarely express those views publicly, then electoral outcomes and public discourse may tell only part of the story. Drawing

on political science, she refers to this phenomenon as “preference falsification”: people conceal what they actually believe because they assume they are isolated, because they fear social sanctions or because dominant public narratives leave little room for dissent.

This insight carries an unexpectedly hopeful implication. Beneath the apparent dominance of exclusionary memory politics may exist constituencies that remain largely invisible precisely because they are invisible to one another. For practitioners committed to inclusive memorialisation, this possibility significantly impacts the nature of the challenge they face. Success may depend less on persuading committed nationalists than on creating spaces where those already uncomfortable with exclusionary narratives discover that they are not alone.

The conversation repeatedly returned to this theme: that democratic transformation often begins not with dramatic shifts in political leadership but with quieter changes in what people believe can legitimately be said, remembered and imagined together. If memory has become one of the principal instruments through which political elites reproduce polarisation, it may also become one of the spaces where societies slowly begin to reclaim a different political future.

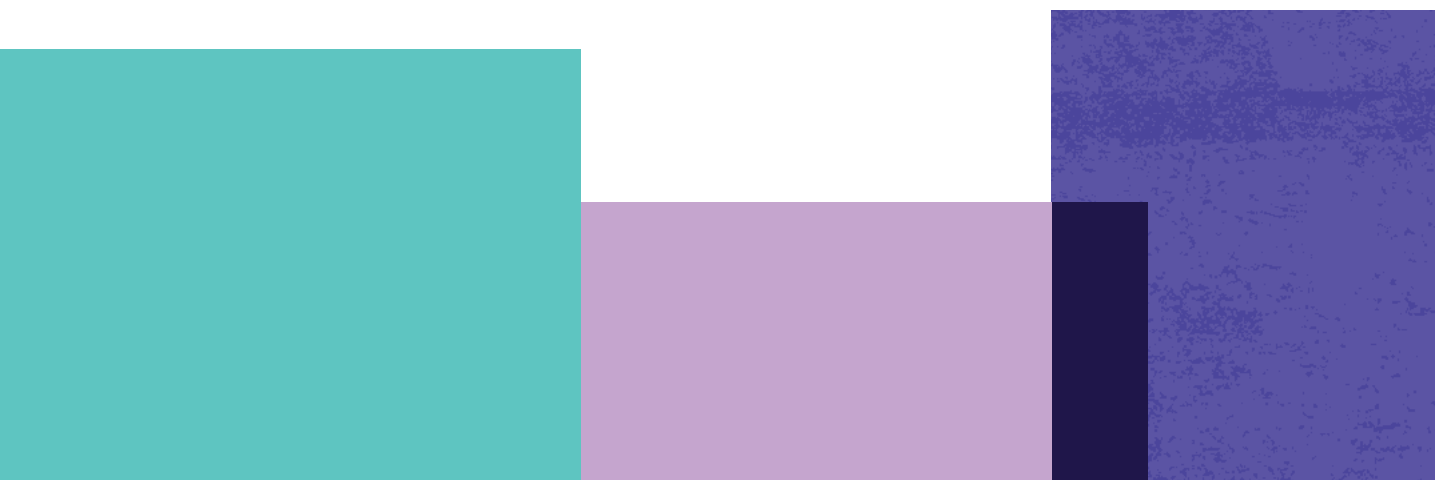


The task is neither easy nor quick. But as the discussion made increasingly clear, it is impossible to understand contemporary politics in the Western Balkans without understanding the politics of memory itself. Memory is never merely about the past, but one of the principal ways societies negotiate who belongs, who is trusted, whose suffering counts and, ultimately, what kinds of futures remain imaginable. Perhaps the most important shift in Denisa Kostovicova's argument comes when she subtly overturns one of the assumptions that has shaped much of transitional justice over the past three decades. For years, practitioners have understandably concentrated on establishing facts, documenting crimes and ensuring that victims' experiences are recognised with dignity and accuracy. Those tasks remain indispensable. Without facts there can be no accountability, without accountability there can be no meaningful justice, and without justice the wounds left by violence are easily reopened by those who continue to profit from them.

However, it emerges that much of the work of practitioners such as those in inclusive memorialisation cannot be measured simply through policy reform, curriculum revision or institutional recognition, important though all those achievements undoubtedly are. Its deeper significance lies in creating spaces where people encounter one another differently than political polarisation normally allows. Community

exhibitions, oral history projects, artistic collaborations, local commemorations or conversations between survivors rarely transform governments overnight. Yet they produce something politics itself cannot easily manufacture. They allow citizens to experience forms of public life in which complexity is not treated as weakness, empathy is not interpreted as betrayal and acknowledging another community's suffering does not diminish one's own. These experiences matter precisely because they precede political agreement. Participants do not leave such encounters having resolved every disagreement about history, identity or responsibility. They leave having discovered that disagreement itself need not prevent cooperation. They begin to recognise that democratic coexistence does not require identical memories. It requires something both more modest and more demanding: the willingness to inhabit a shared civic space despite continuing differences about the past.

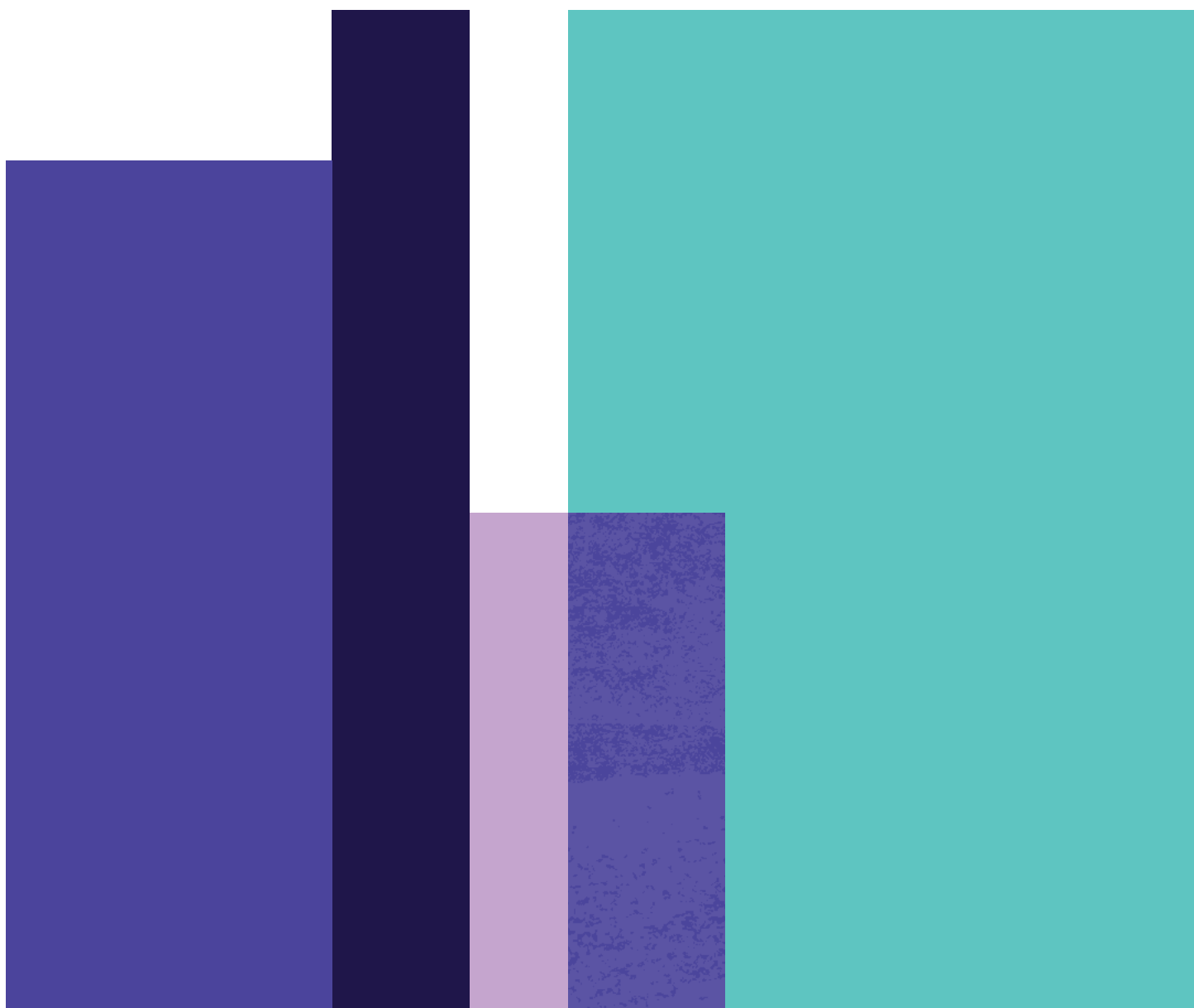
In that sense, inclusive memorialisation does something that is rarely captured by conventional evaluation frameworks. Done well, it can create democratic experience before it creates democratic consensus. Political institutions rarely generate new civic relationships on their own. More often, they consolidate relationships that societies have already begun building elsewhere. Long before constitutions change, before governments fall or before new political



coalitions emerge, people acquire practical experience of another way of living together. They discover, often in small local settings, that cooperation is possible without unanimity and that solidarity does not require sameness. Mark Freeman argued that democracies become vulnerable when conflict entrepreneurs convince citizens that no legitimate political space exists between opposing camps. Ann Rigney invited us to think of hope not as optimism but as the refusal to accept that the future has already been determined. Kostovicova brings those conversations together by showing why memory occupies such a central place within this democratic

struggle. Memory is not simply where societies preserve accounts of what happened. It is one of the principal arenas in which they negotiate what kinds of political futures remain possible.

Different memories will continue to exist. Democratic societies are not built upon unanimous recollections of history, but upon the capacity to prevent those different memories from becoming permanent instruments of exclusion. The challenge, as Kostovicova reminds us, is therefore not to remove politics from memory. It is to cultivate forms of politics that are capable of living with complexity rather than fearing it.



Conclusion

One of the most striking insights to emerge from this series is that inclusive memorialisation is often misunderstood. It is frequently presented as a cultural practice, an educational tool or a mechanism for acknowledging past suffering. It is all of these things. Yet the conversations collected here suggest something more profound. Memorialisation is also one of the ways societies continually negotiate what kinds of political communities they are becoming.

This may seem like an ambitious claim for a field that is often associated with museums, memorials and commemorative ceremonies. Yet every discussion in this series returned, in one form or another, to the same underlying question. How do societies preserve the dignity of those who suffered without allowing suffering itself to become the only foundation of collective identity? How do they acknowledge painful histories without becoming imprisoned by them? And how do they ensure that remembrance strengthens democratic life rather than reinforcing the divisions that violence itself created?

None of the contributors offered easy answers, nor should they have. Societies emerging from violence rarely face choices between forgetting and remembering, or between truth and

denial. Their challenge is considerably more demanding. They must learn to live with different experiences of the past while resisting the temptation to transform those differences into permanent political boundaries. That requires more than historical knowledge. It requires democratic imagination.

Across these essays, remembrance gradually emerges not as a backward-looking exercise but as an ongoing conversation between past, present and future. Frauke de Weijer and Alison Castel remind us that violence fractures not only institutions and communities but also the narratives through which societies understand themselves. Collective trauma simplifies those narratives, creating stories that offer psychological stability but can also become increasingly resistant to complexity. Inclusive memorialisation, they suggest, begins by reopening that narrative space, allowing communities to rediscover the possibility that different experiences can coexist without threatening one another. Mark Freeman approaches the same challenge from another direction. Polarisation, he argues, does not become dangerous simply because people disagree. Democracies depend upon disagreement. They become vulnerable when conflict entrepreneurs succeed in convincing citizens that



disagreement itself is impossible, that society consists only of mutually exclusive camps with no legitimate space between them. Protecting democracy therefore requires protecting the political and civic space in which complexity, uncertainty and cooperation remain possible.

Ann Rigney carries the conversation further by inviting us to reconsider the relationship between memory and hope. Societies, she argues, remember not only loss but also solidarity, courage and moments when people refused to accept violence as inevitable. Such memories do not erase suffering or diminish the importance of justice. Rather, they remind us that history contains resources for imagining different futures. Hope, in this understanding, is not optimism. It is the refusal to accept that the future has already been determined by the past.

Denisa Kostovicova completes this journey by demonstrating why memory itself has become one of the principal arenas of democratic contestation. The question, she suggests, is not whether memory should remain outside politics. It never has. The real question concerns the kind of politics different forms of remembrance sustain. Memory can be mobilised to justify exclusion, deepen polarisation and legitimise authoritarian

forms of power. But it can also expand democratic space by enabling citizens to recognise one another as participants in a shared political community despite continuing differences about history.

Taken together, these conversations point towards a remarkably consistent understanding of inclusive memorialisation.

Its purpose is not to produce a single authorised account of the past. Such an ambition would neither be realistic nor desirable in plural societies marked by diverse experiences of violence. Nor is its purpose to persuade everyone to remember in the same way. Democratic societies are characterised not by unanimous memories but by the capacity to remain in conversation across different memories without allowing those differences to become permanent instruments of exclusion. Inclusive memorialisation is not an attempt to simplify history. It is an invitation to embrace its complexity. It recognises that acknowledging another community's suffering does not diminish one's own, that empathy is not the same as equivalence and that democratic coexistence depends less upon historical agreement than upon the willingness to inhabit a shared civic space despite continuing disagreement. Every exhibition, oral history project,



commemorative event, artistic intervention, educational programme and local dialogue creates opportunities for citizens to encounter one another differently than political polarisation usually permits. Such initiatives rarely transform institutions overnight, nor should their value be judged solely by immediate political outcomes. Their deeper significance lies elsewhere. They expand the space within which societies continue imagining themselves. They create experiences of cooperation before consensus, relationships before reconciliation and civic trust before institutional reform.

This understanding also offers an important corrective to contemporary

public debate. In many societies today, memories of violence are increasingly mobilised to reinforce fear, certainty and exclusion. The temptation to divide the world into clear moral categories -heroes and traitors, victims and enemies, patriots and outsiders - has become a powerful political resource. Yet every contribution to this series reminds us that democracy depends upon precisely the opposite impulse. It depends upon preserving spaces in which complexity can survive, uncertainty can be acknowledged, and different experiences can remain in conversation without requiring uniformity. Perhaps this is ultimately what inclusive memorialisation seeks to protect – that we remember in ways that leave the future open.





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