Bijeljina is located in the North-East of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), on the border with Serbia. Administratively, it belongs to the entity of Republica Srpska (RS). The population of Bijeljina according to the 2013\(^1\) census was 114,663, while in 1991 it had been 96,988. The city is a regional center with a university and a district court for the wider region, as well as being the seat for several entity-level institutions. It also has a well-developed media sector, with several TV production houses; Radio-Television BN is broadcast nationwide, as well as in neighboring countries via cable.

The ethnic composition of the Bijeljina in 1991 was 59% Serb, 31% Bosniak (or Muslim\(^2\)), 5% Yugoslav, 5% ‘Other’, and less than 1% Croat. Today, the Serb population has increased, as a consequence of the war displacement and migration issues while other groups decreased for those same reasons. Majority of the Bijeljina citizens supports reconciliation efforts, including an increased support for the 1990s victims, reconciliation through educational and cultural activities, community initiatives tailored for building trust and cooperation (survey results in the graph below).

In the post-war elections, the majority of the 31-member Municipal Assembly seats have been held by parties whose voter constituency is Serb, with few seats held by the parties whose constituency is Bosniak or Croat (two parties held one seat each in the 2012 elections). Bijeljina has recently been described as the “oppositional fortress” to the government under Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska, even though the 2012 election results in 2012 where the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) won 25%, while Dodik’s SNSD won 21\(^{3}\).\(^\text{3}\)

Bijeljina had a strong manufacturing industry before the war, producing food, and particularly cereal, sugar and metal. Although Bijeljina was not a battlefield during the war in the way that most other cities in BiH were, it has suffered heavily during the transitional post-war period. The large manufacturing factories have deteriorated or closed. Bijeljina has not yet recovered economically: as of 2013, the unemployment rate was at 41.38 % (38\(^{th}\) in the country), average salary was 789 BAM (44\(^{th}\) in BiH), and GDP per capita was 5,066.67 (48\(^{th}\) in BiH).\(^4\) Today its economic activity is primarily in the field of agriculture, food manufacturing and construction.\(^5\)


\(^{2}\) The designation Muslim referred to an ethnic, not a religious, group, and was changed to Bosniak after the 1990s war.

\(^{3}\) 2012 BiH local election results:

\(^{4}\) Available at http://www.mojemjesto.ba/.

PEOPLE OF BIJELJINA SPEAK\textsuperscript{6}: The people in Bijeljina consider the prosecution of war crimes to be important for the reconciliation process. Although the city was not on a warring front, atrocities happened and justice 20 years after the war has not been served. Discussion participants blamed the politicians for not wanting to move forward and to resolve the pending problems of the community, and those who had been victims themselves were most strong of all in maintaining this. Participants from a Bosniak background mentioned the local community of Janja as a positive example of post-war return. The greatest concern is the bleak economic environment. Further steps towards reconciliation are looked for in the educational system: currently the system is divisive, teaching three diverse narratives and not actively promoting dialogue between children of different ethnic backgrounds. Civil society plays an important role, as a mediator between people, as well as educationally. Projects that the schools are currently lacking have been implemented by NGOs, but their capacities and outreach are too limited to break through the ethno-nationalistic collectives. These problems are partially evident in higher education too: a majority of the students attending the university are from smaller RS cities, even from those cities where other universities, such as those in Sarajevo or Mostar, would be closer and otherwise a more feasible option. On the political side, participants held that the international community is largely responsible for the current situation.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|}
\hline
Share of Bijeljina citizens that: & \% \\
\hline
support increasing support for victims of the 1990s war & 71 \\
\hline
support social and cultural programming focused on obstacles to a common life & 81 \\
\hline
support initiatives that show communities the basis which exists for trust-building and cooperation & 72 \\
\hline
support social and cultural programming focused on obstacles to a common life & 81 \\
\hline
support educational programming to combat prejudice & 86 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{6} This section is a summary of key-points form the Focus Group and Public Event in Bijeljina