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CHAPTER 10

From Armed Conflicts to Online Friendships: The Role of TikTok in Bottom-Up Deliberative Reconciliation in Former Yugoslavia

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10.1 Introduction

Social media constitute a new public sphere, profoundly transforming the realm of politics, economy, entertainment, culture production and everyday life. Conceptualised as networks with a multitude of private, semi-private and public digital spaces, they have opened new possibilities for various bottom-up initiatives from journalism to online activism. Most importantly, social media are transnational, enabling communication, cooperation and cultural exchange across borders. They facilitate large-scale conversations and transnationalisation of local relations (Latham & Sassen, 2005, p. 37), allowing private individuals to enter political arenas. With the possibility to connect large numbers of people who can

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communicate in real time through chat and audio or video streams, they have become important hangout spaces where everyday life occurs. As such, these digital spaces are potentially opening new avenues of reconciliation in post-conflict societies. They also enable new forms of deliberation, as individuals from different backgrounds engage in real-time discussions.

Deliberation is defined as a type of communication that allows for free and equal expression of views, rational justification of arguments, promotion of the common good and respect for the arguments of others (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Dryzek, 2016; Parkinson, 2012; Saward, 2002). It can occur within these spontaneous and informal dialogues on social media platforms (Aytac, 2024; Howard, 2021; Jennings et al., 2021). Simultaneously, these networks also provide space for anti-deliberation, defined as communication, behaviour, or discourse practice that is disrespectful, coercive, not inclusive or manipulative (Elstub, 2006; McKay & Tenove, 2021; Schramme, 2024; Scudder, 2023).

This research aims to show how seemingly insignificant discussions on social media can generate pro-reconciliation narratives, and reflect two key deliberative criteria—reciprocity, where participants engage with and acknowledge each other's viewpoints, and an orientation towards the common good. These narratives are challenging the nationalist discourses that dominate official politics and media. The main argument is that the impact of social media on reconciliation in former Yugoslavia is potentially transformative. The chapter investigates narratives within the online conversations that are not imposed in a top-down manner but rather emerge within the circles of ordinary social media users. It contributes to the debates about the question of whether reconciliation can and should be achieved on a collective or individual level. This question is central to this research, which investigates how social media can help bridge the gap between these two levels.

The principal goal of this research is therefore to investigate how, when large numbers of people discuss reconciliation in front of a wide audience on social media, the level of interpersonal relations rises from the confines of the private sphere into the public domain, connecting personal and collective level of transitional justice. The second goal is to investigate how social media facilitate deliberative engagements and whether TikTok livestreams can contribute to the production of the reconciliation narratives. The chapter examines how these narratives reflect the two

deliberative criteria, namely, reciprocity, where participants acknowledge and respond to each other's viewpoints, and orientation towards a common good, as users frequently express shared desires for peace, coexistence and mutual understanding across ethnic divides. Reciprocity refers to conversations characterised by the other-regarding logic (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, p. 55) and respecting their counterarguments (Pedrini et al., 2013, p. 483). The orientation towards the common good refers to goals and ideals participants have in common (Ercan et al., 2022; Bächtiger et al., 2022; Cohen, 1989).

The analysed online conversations resembled truth commissions, which are informal, non-judicial bodies established to investigate and document past human rights violations (Hayner, 2010, p. 11), because many participants in these conversations claimed to have taken part in the wars of the 1990s or witnessed the atrocities and then discussed them online. The conversations that are taking place on social media can potentially have significant value, particularly in terms of reconciliation defined as coming to terms with the past (Dragović-Soso & Gordy, 2011, p. 193). The potential of social media to redefine the concept of reconciliation lies in their ability to bridge the individual and societal levels—shifting it from a formal, institutionalised process towards a more fluid, everyday practice. These networks have transformed the public sphere by elevating the agency of ordinary people, who are increasingly able to participate in political conversations online. While social media are often criticised as spaces of anti-deliberation, where algorithmic systems promote anti-social behaviour and hate speech, this research attempts to examine less-explored deliberative practices, showing that the algorithmic systems can also promote pro-social behaviour and enhance interethnic dialogues in post-conflict societies.

As communication technologies become more developed and affordable, social media create new spaces for deliberation and transform human relations. They provide possibilities for establishing and maintaining close long-distance relationships not only with family and immediate surroundings, but also with individuals outside predetermined social circles limited by physical locality, ethnic or national identity and social status. They also change the concepts of friendship and community, allowing people to connect in a more "nomadic" manner (Nikolić & Skinner, 2019, p. 891). This means that social media enable users to expand their circles of online friends, regardless of physical and cultural boundaries.

10.2 Social Media and the Rise of Informal Deliberative Spaces

This chapter attempts to fill the gap in the literature about deliberative communication on social media and the potential of these networks to contribute to reconciliation in post-conflict zones in the Western Balkans. It has been acknowledged that social media open "democratic modes of socio-technical organizing" (Mannell & Smith, 2022, p. 10) while contributing to "informal networked deliberation" (Tanasoca, 2023, p. 23). While social media have many adverse effects, like the spreading of hate speech, fake news and right-wing activism, they can also be harnessed for various grassroots initiatives and left-wing activism. Existing research suggests that social media can both provoke and hinder post-conflict reconstruction (Schoemaker & Stremlau, 2014, p. 141). Their positive impact lies in the capacity to foster reconciliation activism (Kasadha, 2022, p. 341) and stimulate large-scale interethnic dialogues by connecting people regardless of physical distance (Best, 2013, p. 23).

Within online spaces of social media, the spheres of private and public blur. This phenomenon can be conceptualised as "scalable sociality," where social media users can choose the degree of privacy by limiting the size of the group participating in the conversation (Borgerson & Miller, 2016, p. 520). Since conversations can shift between private and public, nothing that happens online can be considered either strictly public or completely private. On TikTok livestreams, relationship-building and mundane everyday activities, including eating and sleeping, often occur in front of international audiences. As a result, online friendships can potentially aid peacebuilding in post-conflict regions by changing the dynamics "on the ground," providing space for more deliberative interactions.

Increasingly inclusive and participatory, social media have emerged as a "principal site of civic deliberation" (Howard, 2021, p. 181). Critically, they have expanded the scale of online discussions by enabling more people to participate in deliberative conversations (Shortall et al., 2022). However, social media are also criticised for being heavily controlled, privately owned spaces. Scholars claim that social media pose challenges to democracy by "raising the cost" of deliberation and making it more difficult to achieve (Aytac, 2022, p. 7), while enclosing users in echo chambers where they are exposed to fake news (Rhodes, 2022, p. 1). As these platforms are increasingly governed and organised through automated AI systems, they are also criticised for diminishing human decision-making

(König, 2024, p. 195) and exerting "indirect algorithmic control" (Aytac, 2022, p. 22). Yet, because the AI systems embedded in social media are designed to operate autonomously, they can be influenced both by platform regulators and by users with algorithmic literacy (Silva et al., 2024). Moreover, recent studies have shown that social media do not necessarily create echo chambers or that their effects are less significant than previously assumed (Hartmann et al., 2025), particularly on TikTok, which exposes users to more diverse content (Gao et al., 2023).

Research on bottom-up reconciliation initiatives on social media is relevant because most official reconciliation projects in former Yugoslavia have failed or stalled, especially since some parties do not want to confront the past (Griessler, 2020; Kostovicova, 2023; Touquet & Vermeersch, 2016). Reconciliation is a contested concept because of its ambiguity, dynamism and limited consensus on its definition (Dwyer, 1999, p. 81). With no strict rules on how it can be achieved in practice (Kymlicka & Bashir, 2008, p. 4), assessing the success of reconciliation projects becomes extremely challenging. However, scholarly debates on reconciliation that are "framed by dichotomies" (Kostovicova, 2023, p. 7) provide some guidance on how it can be conceptualised and reconceptualised. One of the key dimensions of these debates is the distinction between individual and collective levels of reconciliation.

Ethnographic research of social media, which involves long-term observation of these online spaces, is necessary to investigate how individual and collective levels of reconciliation can be connected. Reconciliation can be "micro and macro," "formal and informal" or "individual and societal" (Sokolić, 2020, p. 1). If these levels are perceived as distinct categories, the question arises: what are the points of intersection? Is it possible to traverse from one category to the other? More specifically, it is important to establish whether reconciliation at the level of private and individual can rise to the level of public and societal in a bottom-up manner. For example, Mac Ginty's (Mac Ginty, 2014, p. 549) concept of "everyday peace" suggests that local agency is critical, and a bottom-up approach to reconciliation recognises the relevance of people-to-people activities. Similarly, Pickering (2007, p. 3) stresses the importance of examining the processes of daily life "and the view from the ground floor," acknowledging that ordinary people influence the implementation of peacebuilding programs.

By bringing private conversations into the public realm, social media platforms facilitate the emergence of new discourses that can influence broader societal narratives and contribute to the reconciliation process.

This happens despite the "digital domination" of platforms and the "raising the cost of deliberative engagement" on social media (Aytac, 2022, p. 6). The power of social media to connect post-conflict regions lies in algorithms as content sorting systems. Algorithms, broadly defined as a "computational procedure" (Dourish, 2016, p. 3) used to automate content curation on social media, ultimately decide what is visible to whom, impacting narratives, communication patterns and friendship choices. Therefore, algorithms are also defined as "complex sociotechnical systems" (Seaver, 2018, p. 378) that "prescribe norms, values, and practices" in society (Bucher, 2018, p. 4). The main criticism of these systems is related to the black box nature of artificial intelligence (AI) methods that enforce "algorithmically personalized nudges" (Schmauder et al., 2023, p. 799) and "algorithmic governance" (Aytac, 2022, p. 17) of private companies, which own social media platforms. While the critique emphasises the dangers of influencing human behaviour in a top-down manner, this research aims to show how these AI systems can also lead to positive outcomes, such as deliberative practices that foster reconciliation.

Platform algorithms impact how social media users connect with each other, suggesting that friendships created by technologies can also be conceptualised as "algorithmic" (Bucher, 2013; Chambers, 2017). Algorithms influence socialisation on social media by determining friend suggestions, sorting content on news feeds and connecting people based on various factors. Friend suggestions are often based on mutual connections, shared interests and interactions, leading users to connect with similar profiles. This process can connect people from the same countries or regions by prioritising geographically relevant content, or it can link individuals across borders based on shared interests, facilitating transnational friendships. Social media algorithms tend to connect users from across the former Yugoslavia due to shared languages, physical proximity, similar political agendas and a common cultural heritage. Notable examples of transnational friendships in the region are found on TikTok, where users can participate in group live streams and converse with each other. Unlike the other platforms, TikTok allows ordinary users to participate almost as much as social media influencers. Traditionally, influencers are defined by their ability to "accumulate a relatively large following on social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives" and to "monetise their following" (Abidin, 2015, p. 1). While TikTok sets a threshold of 1000 followers for hosting livestreams, it allows any user to participate in others' streams, enabling widespread interaction among the

users from former Yugoslavia. The platform's gifting system further encourages participation through monetary gifts. TikTok's gifting system enables users to purchase in-app currency ("coins") and convert them into virtual gifts. These virtual gifts appear in the form of decorative stickers and can be transferred only during livestreams. Revenue is generated within the platform, with TikTok retaining about 50% of each gift's value as fees. Longer streams with high levels of engagement in the form of likes, shares and comments tend to increase the volume of gifts. This model significantly differs from traditional influencer marketing, which relies on brand sponsorships and platform advertising payouts. TikTok increases participation, democratises content creation and keeps the money circulating on the platform, thus shifting many from passive viewers to active content creators. As a profit-driven platform borrowing features from the gaming industry, TikTok maximises engagement through algorithmic content curation and monetisation, blending entertainment, work, and activism. This economic model creates an inclusive, participatory space where users are driven both by profit and by the desire to engage in meaningful conversations.

The theoretical framework of this chapter situates TikTok livestreams as emergent spaces of informal deliberation, where individuals engage in emotionally charged yet constructive dialogue that connects personal experiences with collective memory. This participatory, bottom-up dynamic represents a "plebiscitary" form of deliberation that unfolds at the intersection of the private and public spheres. This research therefore builds on existing literature on transitional justice and reconciliation, but also on the role of social media in fostering deliberation.

10.3 Methodology

This research focuses on TikTok live streams gathering users from former Yugoslavia to share memories of the wars in the nineties. The research methodology includes a digital ethnography and narrative analysis of livestream segments. I evaluate these conversations based on the deliberative principles of reciprocity and common good orientation. The ethnographic field research involved observing online behaviour. For instance, I listened to audio conversations and read comments, profile information and viewing metrics. I listened to extremely lengthy conversations, which sometimes lasted for 14–24 hours. The aim was to detect reconciliatory narratives within these conversations. The ethnographic approach to

research has been unobtrusive online observation, limited to passive listening without interacting with the group. This ensured a natural flow of conversations without interruptions from outside the community.

Before all, the conversations were transcribed and analysed by applying a coding process to identify recurring topics and concepts. Then, the segments used for narrative analysis were identified using the two deliberation criteria—reciprocity, where participants acknowledge and respond to each other's viewpoints, and orientation towards a common good, as users frequently express shared desires for peace, coexistence and mutual understanding across ethnic divides. As indicated above, reciprocity denotes other-regarding logic (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, p. 55), and respecting counterarguments (Pedrini et al., 2013, p. 483), while the orientation towards a common good assumes arguments made in the interest of all participants (Bächtiger et al., 2022; Cohen, 1989). From these deliberative segments, the key arguments, which reflect the participants' bottom-up efforts to promote reconciliation, were then distilled into narrative building blocks, comprised of recurring topics and concepts, which are presented in the summary table in the findings section. The analysis of TikTok livestreams also examined how discussions shifted between deliberative and anti-deliberative moments. This layer of analysis, based on the online observation, complemented the narrative analysis by capturing the dynamic nature of the conversations.

The research closely followed 30 participants who frequently attended various online discussions on TikTok between February and December 2023. Out of 30 participants, approximately 65% were male (20 men), and among the nine livestream hosts, 78% were men (7 out of 9). Various livestreams were treated as segments of the same conversation. The group within these livestreams was fluid, with participants joining and leaving conversations and befriending and unfriending each other. The research methodology had to be adapted to this non-linear environment. It followed multiple interwoven threads of discussions, often in livestreams that were happening simultaneously.

This cohort had representatives of different ethnic groups from former Yugoslavia, including Albanians, Bosniaks, Croats, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Serbs and Slovenians. The participants were dispersed not only across the former Yugoslavia, but also in other countries with large diasporas, including Austria, Canada, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the USA. While demographic data were not available on the platform itself, it was revealed during livestreams that most participants had either

participated in military operations during the wars of the 1990s or witnessed the wars as civilians.

The research has some limitations. The main challenge has been the selection of samples, particularly with regard to the algorithmic bias. To overcome this problem, I approached the research field as an ordinary user rather than an objective spectator. As a researcher from Serbia, who is personally interested in social media content from former Yugoslavia and reconciliation in the region, I was deliberately guiding the platform's algorithms towards types of videos and livestreams. This process started in February 2022, one year before the research period. When I informed the algorithm of my content preferences, it eventually led me to livestreams discussing the wars in Yugoslavia. The sample is therefore both subjective and objective—a result of my interaction with the platform's algorithms.

The sample included only livestreams in Serbo-Croatian, a language most widely used in former Yugoslavia. While these livestreams often included participants who spoke Albanian, Macedonian or Slovenian, these ethnic groups were arguably less represented. The limitations of the field research also include restrictions imposed by both author's limited knowledge of Albanian and Slovenian languages and the algorithmic recommendations, which navigated the research by guiding the author through the livestreams. An additional limitation was the anonymity of users. Since these livestreams are semi-private rather than traditionally public spaces, i.e., participants used pseudonyms and avatars, all the conversations were fully anonymised.

10.4 Findings: Deliberation and Reconciliation from Below

As the algorithms tend to connect large groups of users, motivating them to stay proactive on the platform, stories about 1990s war memories in Yugoslavia emerged as a sub-genre of TikTok livestreams. By engaging in hours-long conversations, users demonstrated their need to socialise, argue, share personal stories and seek apologies, forgiveness or affirmation of victims from their peers from other ethnic groups. Many participants of these TikTok livestreams still suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and want to talk about the war. About 65% of them openly admitted that they are participating in TikTok livestreams to discuss the war traumas to gain a sense of relief and heal. While just over 20% of them said that they regularly travelled around the region, most of them disclosed that they

had never visited any of the neighbouring countries since the wars began. Considering these statistics, it is evident that TikTok serves as a platform where people from the region can establish friendships with people from other countries and discuss war atrocities.

Participants also hoped to establish truths about war crimes, dedicating extensive time to discussing war activities in details. They justified this quest to secure a peaceful future for posterity in the region. To achieve this goal, they attempted to forge policy recommendations and outline solutions for reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. On a personal level, they strived to establish friendships. They used online communication channels to socialise online and arrange face-to-face meetings, showing determination and desire for reconciliation.

In over 73% of livestreams, participants discussed personal issues. The topics included everyday problems, financial difficulties, health issues and interpersonal relations. Over 30% of livestreams featured entertainment segments, such as playing regional music and telling anecdotes from the war. However, the main aim of the livestreams was to establish truth and understand the past. Indeed, the largest portions of livestreams have been dedicated to discussions about the wars and implications for the region's future. On several occasions, they organised humanitarian activities like collecting money for poor war victims in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Coming from diverse backgrounds and representing various political opinions across the spectrum, participants in these livestreams engaged in both deliberative and anti-deliberative behaviours. Each livestream typically included nine participants, one host and up to eight additional speakers, which is the technical limit imposed by TikTok. While some conversations were relatively well-organised, others were chaotic. For instance, participants often interrupted each other, spoke simultaneously and entered or exited the livestream.

Moderators, appointed by the host, have significant control over the flow of the discussion. They can mute or unmute participants, accept or remove them from the livestream, delete comments and ban users. In this context, moderators play a complex role. Unlike trained facilitators in formal deliberative mini-publics, who are expected to ensure equal participation and support constructive dialogue, moderators on TikTok are often lay users who reflect the host's preferences or political biases. As a result, their actions can encourage deliberation by either muting disruptive users or allowing marginal voices to speak. However, they can also promote anti-deliberation by silencing dissenting opinions, enabling trolling or

reinforcing echo chambers. The moderator's role is thus central in shaping the tone and inclusivity of the discussions, even though it lacks the structure and neutrality associated with formal deliberative settings (Spada & Vreeland, 2013, p. 1).

While large sections of these conversations were dominated by anti-deliberative discourse, practice characterised by disrespectful, coercive, non-inclusive and even manipulative behaviour, it was possible to detect segments of deliberative communication, which included free and equal expression of views, rational argumentation, promotion of the common good and respect for other livestream participants. It is important to clarify that this study's objective was *not* to determine the dominant types of discourse on TikTok. Rather, the aim was to provide evidence that deliberative discussions can occur on this social media platform and that such discussions have the potential to foster reconciliation. Still, I believe that discourse often fluctuates, being anti-deliberative in one moment and deliberative in others. In other words, discourse can shift over time. Initially, anti-deliberative discussions appeared to be more prevalent; however, over the course of the observed period, the presence of discourse reflecting deliberative ideals has increased within the same groups of users. The livestreams alternated between being deliberative and anti-deliberative. Anti-deliberative tendencies often arose when participants discussed ethnic identities, leading to heated arguments and mutual accusations. For instance, Serb participants have been accusing Bosniaks of failing to acknowledge their victims, while Bosniaks have been accusing Serbs of denying the genocide in Srebrenica. These exchanges were typically marked by insults and confrontational language.

However, these anti-deliberative episodes were often interrupted by reconciliatory narratives that attempt to redirect the conversation. For example, a participant would express mutual respect for all victims and emphasise the importance of reconciliation for regional peace. Such deliberative efforts, in turn, were met with resistance in some cases as others reintroduced divisive rhetoric. A common example involved challenging the legitimacy of speakers advocating for reconciliation, such as accusing someone of hypocrisy for speaking about Bosnia and Herzegovina while living in Serbia and labelling them with derogatory terms like "genocidal people." This cyclical pattern of alternating deliberative and anti-deliberative discourse appeared in more than 90% of the analysed videos. At times, this group showed great cohesion while, at other times, it seemed loosely connected and fragile.

The analysis has revealed three types of interactions that correspond to three principal motives for participating in livestreams. At one level, conversations can be categorised as a form of digital or play labour (Fuchs, 2014) because people join the platform to earn revenue. Since profits mainly come from users who send monetary gifts, friendships on the platform can be profit-driven. At the second level, TikTok livestreams function as hangout spaces where participants spend their leisure time socialising with each other. At the third level, TikTok livestreams are also utilised as media platforms for activism, often functioning as an informal truth and reconciliation commission. The overlap of these three levels poses a tremendous challenge for narrative analysis. Therefore, the research recognises that these online discussions are a contemporary form of online activism that blends commercial and non-commercial activities at the intersection of private and public (Alperstein, 2021, p. 76).

The narratives were analysed for their reconciliatory potential. Crucially, I focused on deliberative conversations with recurring topics and concepts. The narrative analysis has shown that certain arguments consistently stood out. These narratives were streamlined into four themes: transnational identity and friendships, approach to reconciliation, solutions for the future and the acknowledgement of victims (Table 10.1).

The narrative building blocks extracted from conversations on TikTok livestreams suggest that the participants were attempting to find holistic solutions for interethnic reconciliation. They discussed both the past and the future, outlining the foundational reasons and methods for reconciliation. For instance, they established facts and provided concrete suggestions for resolving disputes and securing long-term peace in the region. On a personal level, they exchanged memories and traumas from the wars while also acknowledging the victims of other ethnic groups and the war crimes committed by their own groups.

Reciprocity was evident when participants respectfully engaged with each other, considering diverse perspectives and addressing war crimes committed by representatives of different ethnic groups. For example, some participants openly acknowledged atrocities committed by their ethnic groups while respecting the experiences of others. Statements like “Everyone committed war crimes, but Srebrenica genocide is the biggest war crime” and “I respect your victims” illustrate this ideal. These remarks demonstrate a willingness to listen, acknowledge shared pain and accept the validity of other perspectives, even when the topic was emotionally charged.

Table 10.1 Key reconciliation narratives extracted from TikTok livestream conversations

Transnational identity and friendships	*Approach to reconciliation*	*Solutions for the future*	*Acknowledging victims*
"We should all be friends"	"We should work on reconciliation because of our children"	"We can create a new Yugoslavia similar to European Union"	"We should acknowledge all the victims, and everyone's religion"
"I have friends everywhere in Yugoslavia"	"We should not forget the war but talk about it to remember what happened and not to repeat it"	"To have a better future, we should be developing economy instead of focusing on politics"	"I respect your victims"
"We should live normally, travel and socialise with people from all over Yugoslavia"	"We should talk about the events during the wars in the nineties because many of us still have traumas and we need to heal them"	"Vojvodina should be an example of how various ethnic groups can live peacefully together"	"Everyone committed war crimes, but Srebrenica genocide is the biggest war crime"
"We should be friends instead of enemies because we use the same language and have the same culture"	"We should forget about the war and move on"	"The whole Balkans should be like Tuzla where religion and ethnicity are not considered important"	"There are Serbian people who don't deny genocide. I acknowledge genocide in Srebrenica"
"We should be divided into good and bad people, not according to ethnic and religious identities"	"Everyone should admit their own war crimes. Then we won't have the reason to fight"	"We have to respect one another, cooperate and live next to each other"	"I am thankful to all the Serbs who admit genocide in Srebrenica. There are many of them here"
"Everyone should be treated like a human being and not as a representative of a nation or ethnic group"	"We must respect all victims, regardless of their ethnicity or nationality"	"Joining European Union would help us coexist together in peace, focusing primarily on economic goals"	"There are Croatian people who are ashamed of war Crimes against Serbs in Croatia. I admit I am ashamed, and I think every normal Croatian should be"
"We are not brothers, but we can be friends"	"To achieve reconciliation, there should be agreement among scholars about the past, and then legislation should ensure that nobody denies or relativises the war crimes"	"We should enable free movement of workers across former Yugoslavia. In that way we can help fill the gaps in the labour market in our countries which would aid our economies and prevent immigration to the Western countries"	"I respect victims of other nations as much as my own"

The orientation towards a common goal was prominent in discussions emphasising peace, reconciliation and mutual understanding as shared objectives. Many participants articulated that addressing the past and promoting regional stability were collective interests. For example, one participant stated, "We should work on reconciliation because of our children," while another claimed, "To achieve reconciliation, there should be agreement among scholars about the past, and then legislation should ensure that nobody denies or relativises the past." These examples highlight a shared focus on building a peaceful and stable future through collaboration and understanding.

When Serbs from either Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina recognised the mass atrocities in Srebrenica as genocide, Bosniaks found this to be cathartic. These acknowledgements of genocide were often welcomed and followed by expressions of appreciation for Serbian victims. For example, one frequently repeated statement was: "I am thankful to all the Serbs who admit genocide in Srebrenica." Similarly, the recognition of war crimes committed by Croats towards Serbs appeared to have a healing effect and fostered mutual respect. One such example reads: "I admit I am ashamed, and I think every normal Croatian should be." These confessions played a crucial role in these discussions, proving the importance of acknowledging past wrongs to build a foundation for future cooperation and peace.

Based on the TikTok livestreams, I have outlined several recommendations that could be used for reconciliation policies. Notably, the participants charted political solutions such as creating a common labour market for the countries of former Yugoslavia, advocating for the admission of all these countries into the European Union and using the cultural and social models of Tuzla in Bosnia and Herzegovina or Vojvodina in Serbia, both known for their long-standing multiculturalism and peaceful coexistence. Tuzla is a Bosnian city that maintained a non-nationalist, multiethnic identity even during the 1990s wars. Vojvodina, an autonomous province in northern Serbia, has six official languages and over 26 ethnic groups, promoting interethnic tolerance through formal multicultural policies and self-governance. These settings serve as practical social models for promoting peaceful and respectful coexistence among different ethnic groups.

Furthermore, they offered various insights on reconciliation strategies, emphasising the need to discuss and agree on the past while also addressing the need to heal traumas and move forward. This dual approach emphasises the importance of acknowledging historical grievances as well

as promoting a forward-looking perspective for building a stable and peaceful future. These discussions demonstrate the participants' desire and ambition to create pragmatic solutions that address both historical and contemporary challenges in the region.

My analyses showed that the TikTok livestreams may create unique deliberative spaces where post-conflict reconciliation is pursued from below through interactions among ordinary citizens. Despite anti-deliberative moments, the repeated emergence of reciprocal dialogue and shared orientation towards peace as a common good demonstrates that social media can facilitate meaningful deliberation in post-conflict zones. These informal digital gatherings challenge the idea that deliberation must be institutionalised to be effective, showing that spontaneous and decentralised conversations can also produce reconciliatory narratives. The participants' efforts to listen, acknowledge victims across ethnic lines and formulate shared visions for the future underscore how digital platforms can bridge the private/public divide and connect personal memory with collective justice. Crucially, these conversations reveal the potential of social media to contribute to peacebuilding at the grassroots level by generating alternative narratives that are absent from both mainstream politics and traditional media.

10.5 Conclusion

This research highlights deliberative conversations on TikTok in which users from the former Yugoslavia engage with the region's violent past and future possibilities of peace. These discussions, focused on reconciliation as a common goal, challenge dominant nationalist narratives promoted by political elites and traditional media. The study also extracts key reconciliatory narratives that could inform policy recommendations or serve as foundations for further dialogue.

The TikTok livestream conversations analysed represent a spontaneous, grassroots initiative aimed at establishing the truth about past atrocities. Through deliberative interactions based on mutual respect and common-good orientation, participants of these online debates acknowledge victims and discuss their visions for a peaceful future of the region. They reflect the voices of ordinary citizens from diverse ethnic backgrounds and locations connected through social media. This study shows that these digital platforms enable deliberative interactions and thereby contribute to reconciliation through social media algorithms. By surfacing emotionally

resonant narratives about the wars in the 1990s, algorithms increase the visibility of content that reinforces collective memory. This is largely driven by engagement-based ranking of these AI systems, which, often inadvertently, amplify reconciliatory content because emotional discussions about the wars tend to attract high levels of participation. Rather than simply clustering like-minded users, TikTok algorithms also generate unexpected encounters that prompt users to articulate, negotiate or even revise their positions on war atrocities in front of diverse audiences. Even though AI systems are heavily criticised for their disruptive impact on societies, this ethnographic research shows the potential of algorithms to enhance social cohesion in post-conflict contexts. While formal reconciliation processes have largely stalled, these informal digital initiatives indicate a continued public will to confront the past and move towards cooperation and coexistence.

Participants on TikTok demonstrate a model of dialogue that blends personal storytelling with public deliberation. Emotionally charged interactions fulfil key deliberative criteria: reciprocity and common goal orientation. These conversations also exemplify a kind of "emotional work" that strengthens deliberation rather than undermines it (Johnson et al., 2019; Morrell et al., 2022; Saam, 2018). These emotionally grounded discussions connect the personal and political, giving voice to people who typically act as informal representatives of their communities. Crucially, these livestreams potentially impact larger segments of societies since they can reach wide audiences.

Although anti-deliberative rhetoric and hate speech are prominent on social media, examples of genuine deliberation are significant because they disrupt dominant political discourse and allow for digital activism. The findings suggest that social media platforms like TikTok, despite their commercial logics, problematic algorithmic settings and other limitations, can serve as unexpected yet powerful tools for rebuilding trust, fostering dialogue and promoting collective healing. Deliberative practices within the analysed livestreams represent a form of a "plebiscitary" public sphere (Gerbaudo, 2022, p. 122) enabled by advanced digital tools. Ethnographic methods offer deeper insights into these deliberative practices, which sometimes provide valuable policy ideas and indicate how ordinary people perceive political issues. The analysed TikTok livestreams are significant because they have produced unique reconciliatory narratives and policy ideas.

The persistence and popularity of TikTok livestreams that thematise war and reconciliation reveal a continuing need of platform users to talk,

reflect, and heal. These discussions imply that the memory of Yugoslavia's dissolution is still fresh, and reconciliation projects are still ongoing. Their unfiltered, emotionally complex exchanges can be understood as both cathartic and politically meaningful, pushing back against official apathy and nationalist retrenchment. By acting as informal truth commissions, they illuminate the possibility of grassroots reconciliation in AI-permeated spaces. Additionally, they are signalling the need for renewed political commitment to transitional justice, including official acknowledgement of past crimes, institutional accountability, and support for reconciliation efforts. Additionally, they signal a broader societal demand for renewed political commitment to transitional justice, including official acknowledgement of war crimes, the establishment of a shared historical narrative and recognition of all victims.

Online apologies and acknowledgements of victims and war crimes are potentially valuable because they challenge the dominant narratives of political elites. These conversations, which naturally belong to the private sphere and occur among ordinary people in private settings, receive publicity on social media and enter the public discourse even though they are not acknowledged by either traditional media or political actors. They have the potential to change conversations on the ground and offer alternative ways of discussing the wars, victims and reconciliation.

This unprecedented practice directly results from the participatory nature of social networks, which tend to involve more ordinary people in public conversations about political issues. Although these online practices are neither pure activism nor citizen journalism, as they always have a commercial, social and personal dimension, they represent public opinion and form a bridge between the private and public spheres.

This study contributes to the growing literature on deliberative democracy, transitional justice and digital peacebuilding, offering empirical evidence on how deliberation unfolds in non-institutional, algorithmically mediated environments of social networks. It expands the scope of the concept of deliberation beyond formal settings, showing how ordinary people use digital platforms to perform political and emotional labour that has real-world impact. By highlighting the link between emotional engagement and deliberative quality, the chapter opens new avenues for exploring how social media can support reconciliation in post-conflict zones and divided societies. These insights are not only relevant for the Western Balkans but may also inform global audiences on the potential of digital communication in promoting reconciliation.

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