

RETURN TO BOSNIA

The Soul of Europe has been working in the Balkans for the last fifteen years as mediators, bringing former enemies round the table. We try to follow Mandela's advice that if you want to make peace do not speak to your friends but to your enemies, so they become your partners.

The road from Kosovo to Montenegro climbs steeply over a series of curves to just under two thousand metres. The view back spreads eastwards to Serbia, southwards to Macedonia, eastwards to Albania; and the roadsides in May are covered in flowers of every colour and species. They brought back memories of a journey we made in Bosnia fifteen years ago, our first. I describe it in *A Tender Bridge*, which explains how we came to work in Bosnia. The abundance of flowers and fruit blossom on the drive from Bihac to Martin Brod overwhelmed the senses. The beauty and fecundity of nature were in piercing sharp contrast to the violent devastation of war: the burnt out villages, wretched, displaced people desperately trying to survive, and a sense of futility.

The country has not changed much in all that time. The towns in Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia still look depressed and undeveloped: such as the city of Visegrad, with its famous bridge. What should be one of the major attractions in the Balkans is a dispirited place. Despite the coach loads of curious Chinese tourists eagerly examining cheap mementos on a street stall, the locals are uninterested and apathetic. The best restaurant in town, with a spectacular view of the historic bridge, serves up poorly cooked cheap cuts of meat with soggy chips. No one can be bothered.

Even Sarajevo has not changed much, despite new parliament buildings and a few brash examples of modern architecture. The Avaz Tower, a mini Shard, looks glossy and funky on the outside. Inside, it is the same as everywhere else: drab and barely functional. The tower's main attraction is a lift that manages to go up and down twenty floors in a couple of seconds. The restaurant on the top offers impressive views of the city; a sweaty waiter tries his best to please, but the food is drab. The old haunts, like the Writer's House restaurant, where we used to spend pleasant evenings surrounded by animated conversation, and where all the tables were occupied, are now almost empty. A Chinese businessman was eating by himself, the only customer, when we turned up for supper.

What has the international community been doing in Bosnia for the last twenty years that there should be not only no improvement in people's lives there, but a marked deterioration?

The EU offices are as swish as in Brussels, but are cut off from the rest of the city, and operate like a Green Zone.

Outside this elegant bubble, Bosnia is a broken country.

The scars of war remain unhealed, both outside and inside.

Two weeks before we arrived, another cataclysm hit Bosnia and Serbia. Catastrophic floods killed and displaced whole villages and towns in the north of the country. This broken country received a double battering.

The people at the EU offices, sleekly groomed and fashionably dressed officials from Italy, Germany, and Slovakia, accompanied by nervous Bosnian advisors clinging on to hard-won, privileged jobs, were keen to tell us that this catastrophe is occupying their attention to the exclusion of all else. The officials made it clear that our project to establish a national dialogue between people and politicians to improve the social, judicial and economic conditions in the country, the purpose of our visit, is not a priority. With barely disguised sighs of irritation, they blocked us, and showed us the door. They did allow us one cup of coffee, pointing out that this was all the EU could give us, as though it were a gift. I wanted to point out that, far from being a present, our taxes had paid for this coffee, let alone their substantial salaries.

Meanwhile, the representatives of the plenums * (see note at the end), and those NGOs determined to establish a national dialogue, are themselves occupied with humanitarian relief for flood victims. They were the first to rescue drowning people. At the same time these brave and impressive activists understand that the catastrophe can only be dealt with as part of a national dialogue. The unwieldy political structures, imposed on Bosnia by the international community after the war, and which continue to encourage rampant corruption, remain not only an obstacle to any democratic improvements, but are even hindering relief at a time of crisis.

Three women dominated the meeting convened to discuss a national dialogue in the youth NGO KULT offices outside Sarajevo in Ilidza. Aida Sejdic, a professor of chemistry, and Elma Begic, another teacher, led the protests in Bihac, not only with aplomb (google them) and a skill which prevented the kind of violent riots that happened elsewhere in Bosnia. Nevertheless the local police arrested Aida for disturbing the peace, when in fact her impromptu speech ensured that the crowd of

three thousand demonstrators did not go on a rampage. The two women from Bihac were matched by Biljana Zgonjanin from Banja Luka, who administers a civic rights' NGO, one of the biggest and most influential in Bosnia, and has successfully managed to raise funds from Brussels. Our meeting in Sarajevo was hosted by KULT, a youth NGO. One of the directors, another impressive woman, took part in the meeting, at which it was agreed to co-operate and take next steps towards a national dialogue.

Our attendance at the Inter Faith Conference in Kosovo, from where we drove to Sarajevo, turned out to be an advantage. Apart from making important contacts for the Soul of Europe with several people at the conference, we managed to create links specifically to help the national dialogue for the future of Bosnia. The plenum representatives appreciated our support and help in creating these connections.

For the moment all we can do is to give them unconditional moral support, encourage them, make contacts for them, and be there whenever and if ever they need us.

The quality of these people, their thoughtfulness, intelligence and common sense, puts all the international bureaucrats we met to shame. The EU officials are bureaucrats, interested primarily in their positions and following regulations to the letter. On the other hand, the representatives of the plenums in Bosnia are practical, idealistic and getting organized, determined to bring improvements to their country. Though open-minded, and aware of their lack of experience in matters of politics, these representatives are wise enough to know that this process will take years, perhaps generations. They face formidable obstacles: politicians who want to eliminate them, and an international community which has no interest in them and would never support them, because the plenum representatives are not considered to have elected authority. Above all, the plenum representatives are hampered by the apathy of a generation in Bosnia which has grown up after the war in a state of dependency. The international community, instead of establishing justice after the war, created a bureaucracy of financial aid, which puts money into the pockets of corrupt elite, and inhibits grassroots economic and social development. People therefore wait for handouts and are discouraged from building society and community in a country they no longer feel belongs to them: they live in a subjugated part of yet another empire. First it was the Ottomans, then the Hapsburgs, and now the EU. This state of affairs is kept permanent by the latest imperialists maintaining control of money and government. The subsequent corruption makes it even more difficult for

any national dialogue to overcome these obstacles. The EU, the politicians, and those running the country's businesses work hand in glove. They fear the instability that any national dialogue may bring.

My overall impression of Bosnia, ten years after my last visit, is that this country remains not only battered, by war, by catastrophes, and by the crushing uncaring bureaucracy of international agencies, but that the situation is worse now than ten years ago. Adnan Jabucar, our manager of projects there since 2000, confirms this impression. Married with three children, he would never have considered leaving his country, but now finds it hard to see any future for his family other than to leave. Adnan was forced to resign from his last job as news anchor because salaried jobs are now tied to and dependent on political affiliations. What has the international community been doing in the two decades since the end of the world, if Bosnia is worse now than it was then? Some infrastructure has been repaired, but perpetual corruption hinders even the building of roads. Unemployment among the young is over 60%. Even a third of this figure would be a scandal in any more developed country.

For all their despair, the Bosnian people we met are, as we remember from our first visit, welcoming, warm-hearted, determined and full of positive energy. They need support, encouragement and opportunity.

My other impression from our meeting with the plenum representatives is that they are in the vanguard of similar movements, like Occupy, throughout Europe and the rest of the world, in which predominantly younger people are tackling injustice and corruption, and challenging their governments, which are seen as being controlled by global financial institutions and businesses. These movements will need to become stronger and more visible, to counteract the alarmingly intolerant and xenophobic nationalisms now shaking the foundations of the EU consensus. What puts the Bosnian movement in the vanguard is the clarity and practicality of its demands. These demands may be specific to the Bosnian situation, but the issues of dealing with corruption, the need for justice, and the challenge to international business imperialists, are common to all countries throughout Europe and the rest of the world. The women we met in Sarajevo are also aware of their movement's weakness and vulnerability. They know they have to learn how to negotiate the dangerous waters of politics, nationally and internationally. As a priority, these courageous, idealistic

plenum representatives need support and encouragement from everywhere and everyone.

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My demand to those who want to change Europe and the world is this: support the plenums and the brave people, mostly women, who represent them. You share the same ideals. For change to happen, people need to encourage and get to know each other; make friends and collaborate across borders. The obstacles are huge. None are more difficult to surmount than those the plenums face in Bosnia; yet these people are coming up with lucid demands and are working on strategies. They are in the vanguard. Join them.

* Plenums developed out of recent student movements in Serbia and Croatia. They are citizens' assemblies where any matters can be raised, voted on by a show of hands, and demands formulated.

11.6.14

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More information about the process of our mediation work can be found in my two books already published: *The Tender Bridge* (Cairns) and *the white house: From Fear to a Handshake* (O Books)

Please go to our website www.soulofeurope.org for details about current and past projects.