

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Me?unarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezi?ni, online ?asopis

No Balkan Mosaic Can Be Complete Without Bosnia

Sonja Biserko

The Srebrenica genocide is and will remain an enduring trauma for all generations in Serbia, both present and future. Each new judgment passed by the Hague tribunal reveals new details and lays bare the enormity of the crime. Although fifteen years have passed since the atrocity, the collective consciousness in Serbia remains largely unchanged. Criticism of selective memory as a prerequisite for reconciliation has been blocked by institutionalized amnesia and relativization. Notwithstanding the Declaration on Srebrenica adopted by the Serbian Assembly, the attitude toward the genocide and what happened during the 1990s in general remains the main obstacle to normalization both in the region and in Serbia. In spite of the intensification of relations in the region, a true normalization will not be possible without a precise diagnosis of what happened in the former Yugoslavia. Such a diagnosis is lacking not because it cannot be made but because, in its relations with the region, the international community has adopted a neutral stance in the belief that this is the way to make Serbia part of European integrations quickly and easily. The younger generations in Serbia need the truth about the 1990s. Although they themselves are not responsible, they bear the burden of frustration and reflection about the crimes committed during the period. If these generations do not progress beyond the interpretation that Serbs were the only victims, the Bosniak-Muslim memory may well desire vengeance. A repetition of crimes must be prevented by building a lasting peace by remembering and telling the truth about the wars of the 1990s.

The attitude of the international community has also contributed to the strengthening of victimhood sentiments within each local nation. Very often, the ambivalence is fortified by the European elites' ambiguous attitude toward the NATO intervention, with the generation of European sixty-eighters developing a guilt complex after initially supporting the intervention. Belgrade has capitalized on this by skillfully imposing a guilt complex on all foreigners who have visited the capital since 2000 and obscuring its responsibility for the events in Kosovo that threatened to throw the whole region into a permanent state of chaos.

Ten whole years have been lost in meandering between desires to "normalize" Serbia and to incorporate the region in the European Union as a whole. This shows that it is not possible to equate all the actors and all the victims. That this is so is borne out by the situation in Bosnia. Although nearly twenty years have passed since the outbreak of the war in Bosnia, Bosnia remains Europe's unresolved moral issue. Bosnia cannot be rebuilt solely on ethnic principles while letting the most responsible side decide its future. Belgrade's insistence on the status quo, on the immutability of the Dayton Peace Agreement and on every arrangement "agreed by the three nations" testifies more to Europe's impotence than to Serbia's strength. Having rallied thanks to the support from the EU and the United States, Serbia is able to pursue a policy of blackmail

because the West is powerless to solve a number of substantial, non-local issues.

The opening up of a European perspective for all Balkan countries has mobilized political elites in the region, with the agreement on association and NATO partnership (or, for some, already membership) establishing a security-political framework to be filled with appropriate content. The fact of the establishment of the framework is very important, especially because it also encompasses Serbia. The framework fortifies the European perspective of the Balkan countries. However, the next phase will be slow and will depend on the internal potential of each country as well as on its horizontal Europeanization, i.e., its society's involvement in changing the value systems.

In order to accelerate the second phase, it is essential to close the territorial and/or state, issues of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most obstruction in this connection comes from Serbia, whose unwillingness to give up its ambitions against other countries harms both those countries and Serbia itself. As regards Kosovo, its full independence will be hastened after the International Court of Justice delivers its opinion. There will be a wave of recognitions accelerating Kosovo's territorial consolidation.

However, the problem of Bosnia remains because there is no political will to address it from a moral point of view. Bosnia has been and remains Europe's moral issue. It is high time the international community defined itself in relation to the crime committed against Bosnia and the Bosniak nation. It is immoral that Srebrenica should be located in the Serb entity and that the murderers and persecutors should be free to walk the streets of that town. When the last person from the Women of Srebrenica has died, Srebrenica will not only be a town of the dead but also a dead town. The Declaration of the European Parliament is therefore an important document designed to prevent the Srebrenica genocide from being forgotten. Europe has at last come to treat the crime as its moral responsibility.

Bosnia can be revitalized only by marginalizing the ethnic principle, which should remain only where it serves to defend the fundamental interests of each nation, as was the case with the chambers of nationalities in the Assembly of the former Yugoslavia. One should not dismiss some of those arrangements. What one instead should dismiss is the platitude Belgrade often repeats that Bosnia is a Yugoslavia in miniature and therefore unviable. A "Citizens' Europe" cannot support this argument. It is important to define clearly the issues of integrating Bosnia (a common army and police, foreign policy, education and an Assembly whose work cannot be blocked by an entity).

Yugoslavia was a paradigm of a state incorporating the ideals and contradictions of modern times. This is why it is so difficult to write off a model to which Balkan countries will be returning to look for their origins. After all, it was Yugoslavia that gave statehood to most of them. Today, the area is characterized by archaic attitudes, absence of ideals, and lack of a sense of common interest and good. Devoid of authentic principles and vigour, it can hardly return to civilized ways without EU help.

The international community has so far done a lot towards the establishment of institutions, state of law and standards; what is needed now is an economic strategy, coupled with substantial financial support, not only for Bosnia but for the region as a whole. A considerable portion of the huge sums directed to the region has ended up in the West through the maintenance of numerous missions.

Nation-building in Bosnia must be put on a new footing with the citizen at its centre. The Bosnian Serbs should be helped to absolve themselves of sole responsibility for genocide (which Belgrade imputes to them) in order to clear the gulf between themselves and the Bosniaks. After all, reconciliation in Bosnia is possible only by acknowledging the truth, not by holding the three sides equally responsible.

Bosnia is the final stage of putting the Balkan mosaic together. It is also the part in which the gravest error was committed. Europe, too, would do well to admit some of its fallacies and blunders. Such an admission would help the region to adopt a more responsible attitude to the recent past.

The preceding text is copyright of the author and/or translator and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.