

Sarajevo : Birth of a hope at the Antifest

Monday 28 May 2012, by [TOUSSAINT Éric](#) (Date first published: 21 May 2012).

Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina, a country ravaged by a war that between 1992 and the beginning of 1996 caused 100.000 deaths (exact figures are unavailable), is certainly looking a lot better but the social situation is dramatic. One statistic says it all: unemployment is at 45 %.

This country of 4.5 million inhabitants is divided into two entities between which there exist multiple points of tension: the federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (51 % of the territory, 65 % of the population, capital Sarajevo) and the Republika Srpska (49 % of the territory, 35 % of the population, capital Banja Luka). In the whole country there are 48 % of Bosniacs (called Muslims between 1970 and 2000), 37 % of Serbs (mostly Christian Orthodox) and 14 % of Croats (mostly Catholics) [1]. Among the 10,000 inhabitants of Sarajevo that were killed during the war, 1,600 were children. The siege of Sarajevo lasted from 5th April 1992 until 29th February 1996 [2].

One of the catalysts of the Yugoslavian implosion at the beginning of the 1990s was the weight of the public debt contracted in consequence of the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s. The leaders of the richer republics (Croatia et Slovenia), in pushing for separation, considered that independence would help them reimburse their part of the Yugoslavian debt (which later had been shared between the six former republics of the ex-Yugoslavian federation) by shedding, what appeared to them to be the millstone of the less privileged countries (Bosnia, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro). This provoked a series of chain reactions expressing the most objectionable nationalism. Bosnia and Herzegovina, which considering its multiethnic nature is a mini Yugoslavia in itself, was caught up in the maelstrom of a war which multiplied acts of barbarity against the population, the massacre of 8,000 Bosniacs at Srebrenica in July 1995 being the most dramatic example. This massacre that much resembled a genocide was perpetrated by units of the army of the Republika Srpska under the command of general Ratko Mladic and assisted by a Serbian paramilitary unit. United Nations forces on the ground turned a blind eye. This is one of the reasons why the Bosniac population holds the UNO in such discredit.

Return to Sarajevo after 18 years

This is my second visit to this town. The first was in February 1994 at the height of the war. Our delegation left Belgium in two cars (several of us were members of « Socialism without Borders » and of the « International Workers Aid for Bosnia») to go and express our solidarity with the multiethnic Resistance to the war that was ravaging ex-Yugoslavia and especially Bosnia-Herzegovina. On that occasion our small delegation only arrived on the outskirts of what resembled a ghost town. The buildings were damaged and the social life was reduced to very little : no cafes open, two or three shops for absolute essentials and the occasional sound of an exploding shell or a round of machine gun fire. Official reports stated that an average of 329 shells burst each day during the siege.

Eighteen years later I am subject to another brutal shock. Certainly hundreds (even thousands) of the buildings still bear the marks of war, but it is undeniable that the historical town center shows signs of relative prosperity. Hundreds of craftsmen, shops and restaurants offering local specialties create a zone of permanent animation. There is a certain easy going calmness in the atmosphere. Many terrace cafes are well filled. I discover a cultural richness to this town that I could only

imagine in 1994.

In Sarajevo, mixing and coexistence of cultures is evident. Today in a one kilometer perimeter we find several superb mosques dating from the 16th and 17th centuries, one of the three biggest synagogues in Europe (a large part of the Jews expelled by the Catholic kings of Spain during the Reconquista of the 15th century found refuge in this great, principally Muslim, town [3]), and Catholic, Orthodox or Evangelical churches. Capital of the most westerly European province of the Ottoman Empire, Sarajevo in the 17th century figured among the biggest cities of Europe with 80,000 inhabitants (comparable to the populations of Genoa, Florence, Brussels or Antwerp; about twice the population of Bordeaux, Barcelona or Cologne).

A country under the supervision of the international institutions

Since the end of the war in 1995 the country has been under the supervision of the international institutions. The agreements signed in Dayton (USA) in December 1995 specifically stated that the director of the Bosnia-Herzegovina Central Bank may not be of Bosnian extraction! The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have installed their representatives in the country alongside the foreign troops supposed to keep guard over the terms of the peace agreements between the two resident communities (in 1995-1996 there were up to 60,000 foreign troops stationed in the country under NATO command. Today there are still some 1300 troops under European command [4]). The population has put up with seventeen years of reinforced neoliberal policies and as previously said, the result is dramatic: in February 2012, according to the official employment agency, 44.2% of the active population were unemployed compared to 35% in 2000 [5].

With the exception of the distribution of water, electricity and the transport systems, almost all the public sector industries have been privatized and in many cases dismantled and sold by their new owners who have put an end to their activities. Everywhere in Sarajevo there are agencies of the two biggest Italian banks, Intesa San Paolo and Unicredit, along with Austrian and German banks. Also to be considered is the investment of Arabic countries in hotels and finance. The hypertrophy of the financial sector exists alongside a chronically under-invested productive sector.

The IMF at work

While the first « Antifest » was going on in Sarajevo, the arrival of a new IMF mission was announced. They were there to finalize the compensatory conditions of a new loan that would enable the repayment of previous loans and follow up the lethal neoliberal policies. The IMF put the Bosnian authorities under pressure to reduce wages and jobs in the public sector, reduce the benefits to wounded war veterans, lower retirement pensions and make their access more difficult, and cut spending on public health care (which is still free in spite of fifteen years of World Bank and IMF pressures).

Hope reborn at the Antifest

The Antifest event from the 13th to 20th May 2012 was made up of cultural activities (concerts attended by between 100 and 300 people) and political debates. Between 50 and 90 people, young for the most part, took part at each of the eleven debates. Among the topics were « Eco-socialism » « The Greek crisis » « The crisis in the European Union » « Reactions to the European Union crisis » [6] « What kind of feminist activism does Bosnia really need? » « Rosa Luxembourg and Mother Theresa: ideological confusion » « Perspectives for direct democracy in south east Europe » etc. The Antifest was organized by a young political group called “Unified Organization for Socialism and Democracy” (which brings together several groups of activists with different ideological sensibilities). It was supported by the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation and collaborated actively with

the subversive festival of Zagreb. The subjects largely covered the principal concerns of a fringe of youth which wants a radical alternative to the capitalistic and patriarchal system. Decidedly, after the remarkable success of the Zagreb [7] subversive festival, new forces for change are at work in this part of the Balkans.

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Footnotes

[1]

[7] See <http://www.cadtm.org/Zagreb-Sarajevo-Resistance-in-the>

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P.S.

* Translated by Mike Krolkowski in collaboration with Vicki Briault.

Footnotes

[1] See (ESSF, article 25347), [Zagreb-Sarajevo : Resistance in the Balkans as crisis grips the EU](#).

[2] See the C.I.A. site : <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bk.html>

[3] During the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia Sarajevo's Jewish community was decimated (9000 Jews were killed out of a total of about 10 000).

[4] <http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bk.html>

[5] See <http://arz.gov.ba/en/statistika-en> (official site of the Bosnie Herzégovine employment agency), see also the site of the C.I.A. : <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bk.html> and also for the year 2009 : <http://bhinfo.fr/Le-taux-de-chomage-grimpe-a-42-1/>

[6] I covered this theme on the basis of my text (ESSF, article 21103), [Eight key proposals for another Europe](#).

[7] See on ESSF (article 25347), [Zagreb-Sarajevo : Resistance in the Balkans as crisis grips the EU](#).