

Bosnia-Herzegovina 20 years later - Sarajevo: Hope and Social Rebellion in 2014

Saturday 13 December 2014, by [TOUSSAINT Éric](#) (Date first published: 1 December 2014).

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 reaches 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 Bosniaks (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 repay 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 Bosniaks 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 Bosniak population holds the UN in such discredit.

Return to Sarajevo after 20 years

This is my third visit to this city. [3] 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 former Yugoslavia and especially Bosnia-Herzegovina. On that occasion our small delegation only reached 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.

Twenty years later: another brutal shock. Certainly hundreds (if not thousands) of the buildings still

bear the marks of war, but it is undeniable that the historical city 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 city that could only be imagined in 1994.

In Sarajevo, mixing and coexistence of cultures is evident. Today in one square kilometer 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 in the 15th century found refuge in this great, principally Muslim, city), [4] as well as Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical churches. Capital of the most westerly European province of the Ottoman Empire, Sarajevo in the 17th century figured among the biggest cities in 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 (Ohio) in December 1995 [5] 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). [6] The population has put up with seventeen years of reinforced neoliberal policies and, as previously said, the result is dramatic: in 2013, 44.3% of the active population were unemployed compared to 35% in 2000. [7]

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 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

The IMF pressurizes the Bosnian authorities 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 pressure).

Hope reborn at the Antifest

The Antifest event from the 13th to 20th May 2012 consisted of cultural activities (concerts attended by between 100 and 300 people) and political debates. Between 50 and 90 mostly young people took part in 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", "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 topics

largely met the concerns of a number of young people who wants a radical alternative to the capitalistic and patriarchal system. Decidedly, after the remarkable success of the Zagreb subversive festival, new forces for change are at work in this part of the Balkans.

Translated by Mike Krolkowski in collaboration with Vicki Briault

The social rebellion of February 2014 ushered in new hopes [8]

Monika Karbowska writes, *"On 5 February 2014 Tuzla gave the signal for a new workers' revolt in Bosnia. Young people set fire to a public building in protest against the corruption of the local canton government. The police retaliated and the little town was shaken with rioting. But then the workers at the DITA chemical complex, who had been protesting in vain for several years against privatization, joined the movement and brought their Tuzla workers' traditions with them: they convinced the young people to stop burning public buildings down since they are the citizens' common goods. They also convinced them to support strikes against privatization. The young rebels spoke to the municipal police officers, who turned out to be their cousins or their school-mates, reluctant to shoot at their family and friends. So the federal government decided to replace the local police with the federal police. Bosnia's actual rulers - an Austrian who is the UN high representative and the EU Special Representative - threatened to bring in a European troop, thereby demonstrating the Bosnian state's true status, i.e. an EU colony. [9] Then protest movements broke out in ten other Bosnian towns, including Sarajevo. Even Republika Srpska was affected, with demonstrations in Banja Luka. The demonstrators demanded the removal of corrupt elites and reform of the political system inherited after the Dayton cease-fire, imposed by western powers, which generated corruption at every level (municipal, cantonal and federal)". [10]*

In February 2014, citizens assembled in plenums, i.e. large self-summoned citizens' assemblies. The need for a liberated voice after a 20 year neoliberal night could clearly be felt. The demands of the plenums focused mainly on social and economic issues, specifically on the following: change of the constitution (the current one is inherited from the Dayton Agreement, which put Bosnia under the EU's control), abolition of privatization, prosecution of corrupt leaders and bosses, reduction of wage differentials, and a memorandum on the debt! These plenums, which brought together not only students, workers, the unemployed, but also many retired persons who had experienced the Yugoslav era of full employment and self-managed companies, demonstrated that the population understands the issues and is aware of its requirements. But the media and the government disregarded these plenums.

One of the plenum's statements indicated the citizens' demand for a new government, which should *"confiscate fraudulently acquired properties, call off the privatization agreements, hand over the factories to the workers and start production as soon as possible."* The participants in the plenums also demanded *"a parity of the salaries of government officials with those of the public and private sector workers, the end of bonuses of all kinds and a stop to the salaries of ministers and other officials whose term had ended"*. [11]

As Tijana Okich, [12] who actively participated in the Sarajevo plenums, says: *"we have had significant changes since the great wave of protests in February 2014, which confirm that the ethno-nationalist elites no longer hold their previous power. The nationalist rhetoric is slowly losing its privileged position in society. Some forms of solidarity and common struggle have surfaced. It is crucial to hear the voice of the people after more than two decades of imposed ethnic divisions, and this is certainly one of the most important events in the post-war history of Bosnia and Herzegovina. One thing is certain: even if the February events have not changed much in official policies, the people have started to rally around common ideas and issues. New initiatives, trends and movements have emerged and we'll have to see where this leads, as it is an election year in BiH. I*

think we will see a new wave of protests as well as new movements and trends on the scene, but it is impossible to predict the future at the moment. The struggle will continue until everyone realizes that the political parties currently governing us are not our legitimate representatives, until we reach an understanding of politics as a collective effort to take joint decisions.” [13]

Open University in Sarajevo and a CADTM meeting in the Balkans

The Open University which was held in Sarajevo from 28 to 30 November 2014 [14] was attended by hundreds of people, mostly youngsters. There I had the opportunity to discuss debt in front of about 100 people, along with Luka Mesec, [15] a young Slovenian MP elected in July 2014 from the United Left. Luka Mesec explained that his organization supported the proposal of launching a debt-audit in Slovenia to identify illegitimate and/or illegal debt. The United Left (in Slovenian, Združena levica ZL) brings together three recently created political parties - the Democratic Labor Party, the Initiative for democratic socialism and the Party for Sustainable Development in Slovenia - and a fourth block emerging from citizens' initiatives during the uprising of 2012-2013. The United Left was barely formed in April 2014, but it made a breakthrough at the European elections of May 2014 (5.47%) and won an unexpected victory in the parliamentary elections of 13 July (5.97%, 6 seats in the Parliament). [16] Let us see what comes out of it.

Parallel to the Open University, the CADTM held a fruitful meeting on the issue of resistance to illegitimate debt. It focused mainly on the Balkans. Delegates from Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Greece, Hungary, Poland, and the CADTM international secretariat were also present (see the initial report: <http://cadtm.org/La-poudriere-sociale-de-l-Europe>).

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P.S.

* <http://cadtm.org/Sarajevo-Hope-and-Social-Rebellion>

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Footnotes

[1] See <http://www.cadtm.org/Zagreb-Sarajevo-Les-resistances-au>

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

[3] My second visit was in May 2012. The first section of this article is taken from an article I wrote during my second visit : <http://cadtm.org/Sarajevo-Birth-of-a-hope-at-the,7985>

[4] During the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia, Sarajevo's Jewish community was decimated (9,000 Jews were killed out of a total of about 10,000).

[5] The Dayton Agreement, signed on 14 December 1995, ended the war in BiH. They recommend a roughly equal partition between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosniak Croat) and a Bosnian Serb Republic. The current system of the government gives the power to three nationalist parties and the country is under international supervision.

[6] See the CIA website: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bk.html>

[7] See the CIA website: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bk.html>

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

[9] See <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/archive/news/20140209/500/500.html?id=25257945>

[10] See <http://cadtm.org/La-revolte-ouvriere-en-Bosnie> and <http://workersinternational.info/2014/11/appeal-for-support-from-dita-workers-in-tuzla/>

[11] See Catherine Samary, Révolte sociale en Bosnie-Herzégovine : « Qui sème la misère récolte la colère », published on 13 February, 2014 <http://cadtm.org/Revolte-sociale-en-Bosnie>

[12] Tijana Okich was one of the organizers of the CADTM's meeting in Sarajevo from 30 November-1 December, 2014.

[13] Bosnie : "Entendre les voix du peuple après plus de deux décennies de divisions ethniques imposées", published on 18 September 2014 <http://cadtm.org/Bosnie-Entendre-les-voix-du-peuple>

[14] See <http://www.24sata.info/vijesti/bosn...>

[15] See <https://www.facebook.com/mesec.luka> and http://sl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luka_Mesec

[16] See <http://ks3260355.kimsufi.com/inprec...>