

Sarajevo 25 years after: paradigm for the future

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The dynamic and sometimes dramatic interplay between the essence and the fate of a city provides the key for a wholesome national reintegration process.



Sarajevo-Spirit, January 2016. Flickr/sundeviljeff. Some rights reserved. Twenty-five years after the outset of the war in Bosnia, it's high time to end the bleak post-war period. In spite of some modest results, the country's overall situation is depressing. Nothing really new, but meanwhile the regional and international context has changed considerably. Bosnia's situation consequently begs reassessment.

At regional level, Croatia's membership is neither enhancing Bosnia's stability nor its integration. After decades of international intervention and anaemic strategies supposed to enhance regional cooperation, the results are unreliable and the territorial integrity of various Balkans' states (Bosnia, Macedonia and Kosovo) should not be taken for granted. While Russia's and Turkey's influence in the region increases, the western block's soft powers appear to be dramatically weakened. More worrying, the overall security situation in central and eastern Europe is endangered and our twenty first century bears a frightening resemblance to aspects of the 1930s. On top of this, experts and political leaders on all sides seem both disoriented and helpless.

This is not the best of all possible worlds for solving Bosnia's problems. Art — that brings us closer to truth — should become the compass in difficult times.

Since the 2003 EU Summit in Thessaloniki – where the promise was made to bring the Balkan countries into the European Union – the EU has been unable to stick to its word. The sole, disastrous, EU strategy for the Balkans has consisted in maintaining the status quo. As for Bosnia, the EU nevertheless has a binding responsibility. Two key issues are at stake.

First, the Dayton Agreement, whatever the sense it admittedly had back in 1995, now completely obstructs the country's fate. Local, regional and international actors are all accountable for what are now inevitable policy changes. It is indeed unavoidable to reopen Pandora's box in order to retrieve something that lay at the bottom: that is, hope –and an end to the fairy tale of the two 'entities.' Nobody should be afraid of a Dayton II process.

Secondly, over the centuries, Bosnia's integrity has proved stable only under various "umbrellas": the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the various Yugoslav states. Today, only the EU can provide such a framework. Bosnia's EU integration process is thus imperative – a partnership being a priority as a short-term first step.

Key too is nevertheless a locally anchored political process.

In his 1992 Letter to his Sarajevo Friends, Bogdan Bogdanović highlighted: defending the city is the only moral paradigm for the future. The often-mentioned Sarajevo-Spirit consists in something strong, hardly destructible: the essence of a city. As Bogdanović wrote, "We all carry, even now, our eternal city within – if only because we do not know another way to structure the world around us." But neither Bogdanović nor we who are writing this ever thought that this essence would descend from the heavens: we have to shape a new city modelled on the old one.

The dynamic and sometimes dramatic interplay between the essence and the fate of a city provides the key for a wholesome national reintegration process. Sarajevo, as well as Bosnia's other cities, Mostar, Tuzla, Banja Luka, Brčko and Bihać may well form the heart of a new regional framework – a design repeatedly formulated by local intellectuals – much more in line with Bosnia's past and adapted to present and forthcoming challenges.

The new generation must not abandon this battleground. As with the previous one, this fight must be fought in and for the country. The 2014 Bosnian Spring faded away, but it nevertheless planted the seeds of hope. This principle of hope, superior to both fear and disillusion, must now flourish. The remarkable Bosnian art scene has here a significant role to play. Art — that brings us closer to truth — should become the compass in difficult times.