

The pressure is off in Mostar

Peace has already returned to Mostar, only a decade after the ruthless war. But the city's political life has become polarized along religious fault lines, and the situation remains tense at a symbolic level.

The first time I went to Mostar was in 1997, just two years after the fighting had stopped. I had been travelling in the region, with Ivo Andric's 1945 book "The Bridge on the Drina" in my backpack. The book carried a picture of the famous Mostar bridge on its cover, and I gained a sentimental relationship with it as I read on. So when I heard a vague rumour from a fellow traveller that it had been rebuilt, I decided to go and have a look. The tip of course turned out to be far from true, but my stay in Mostar still turned out to be memorable. And the seemingly symbolic force of the bridge retained its power over me as the plans for rebuilding slowly proceeded. The circumstances called for a revisit.

The old man by the bridge

Back in 1997 I had stayed with a man I met standing outside his house in the predominantly Muslim eastern part of the city. I was invited to one of the most remarkable meals of my life, in his sister's house next door. Adriatic squid and red wine was served in her bombed-out basement, reinforced iron and bits of cement hanging above our heads like palm leaves.

In pictures taken of this man's neighbourhood just after the Bosnian war, you would have been hard-pressed to find two stones on top of one another. Walking up the central boulevard, which had been the demarcation line during the war, I registered how the walls on either side had been peppered by machine gun fire. The unlucky ones that had been shot on this street, a narrow no-man's land, were just left to rot. I remember the silence felt perilous.

On my revisit I find my way back to the same house. Omer, now an old man, still lives there. He recognises me after a while, and invites me in. His only daughter calls; creator of the wonderful meal some ten years before, she also remembers me. She lives in Zagreb, as the closest of Omer's relatives. More than a dozen have left for the USA, while Omer himself spent the war in Turkey. He doesn't speak English too well.

And this time I really do get to see the beautiful bridge. Contrary to a common misconception, it does not physically adjoin Croats and Bosniaks (as the Bosnian Muslims are called). Both banks are traditionally Bosniak areas, as the number of nearby mosques clearly indicate. But it is not far to the boulevard, the aforementioned demarcation line, that runs from the old town to the "Spanish Square". This central plaza is named after the international peace-keeping forces, a handful of whom lost their lives there.

In 1997 it was easy to predict which way the cars on the boulevard would turn when they got to this square. The ones with the blue federation flag on the number plates would go right and across one of the other, newer bridges into East Mostar; the ones without the flag would go left into the new town. Very few men fit to bear arms would cross that invisible border back then, and of course during the actual war there was an outright "ethnic cleansing" taking place. Some of the Muslim Bosniaks were forced to leave their homes twice: first from the Serbian rockets, then from the Croatian guns.

Multi-ethnic decor

But things have changed. Today it is hard to imagine that the Croats and the Bosniaks fought a bloody street war here just a little over a decade ago, having initially stood shoulder to shoulder against the attacking Serb-dominated Yugoslav Army. But the war effectively unveiled the fact that the multi-ethnic Yugoslavia that president Tito had created was built on a lie, at least according to Mario Vrankic. He heads the peculiarly named but influential Mostar-based Croatian TV station “HTV Oscar C”.

Mario Vrankic was born and raised close to the old bridge. A couple of years ago he was the anchor-man for a ceremony that marked the start of the reconstruction of the bridge. He has no fond memories of the event.

- Honestly I felt like I was reduced to some kind of “multi-ethnic decor”, he says when I meet him in Mostar. – Half of the world came here to celebrate, among others the Italian President. But look what has happened: Today everything around the bridge is in Bosniak hands. 40-50 shopkeepers of Serbian, Croatian or Albanian heritage have lost their properties. The festivities were a big lie: in reality, the bridge has become a symbol of the new division of the city. I never visit the area anymore, because the atmosphere, even the *smell*, has changed.

- I cannot say that I hate anyone from the other side, he continues. - But it is difficult to forgive or forget. The lack of confidence between the groups is total at the moment. Neither am I too optimistic about integration. Today just a handful of Croats and Serbs live on the eastern side. On the other hand, the number of Muslim Bosniaks on the Croat side could amount to as many as 10 000. So West Mostar as of today is one of the most multi-ethnic cities in the former Yugoslavia, Vrankic claims.

A political and religious divide

Before the war the whole of Mostar could boast of being one of Yugoslavia’s most multi-ethnic cities, with about 30 % of marriages transcending the religious divisions. Many Muslims fled Mostar during the war, with more than ten thousand coming to Norway alone. Today there are just as many Croats as Bosniaks living in the city, but although the atmosphere in cafes all around is idyllic and multi-ethnic, Mostar remains a politically divided city: the Croats vote for the Croatian nationalist parties, and the Bosniaks for theirs.

The much-used term “ethnic cleansing” should be used with caution, however; most Bosnians belong to the same ethnic group. But their fellow Slavs are riven by cleavages that run along religious divides. The Croats are normally Roman Catholic, the Serbs Orthodox, and the Bosniaks Muslim. Now most mixed couples have left the city, as have the tarnished Serbs. On the other hand, many immigrants have moved in from the surrounding villages. These are often more conservative, and don’t always get along with the old liberal bourgeoisie, who have traditionally paid little attention to religion when forming friendships. It isn’t for nothing that Mostar actually used to be known as the “red city”, the city where religious faith was of little importance.

When the war started, there were three churches - two Catholic and one Orthodox - in Mostar, along with 36 mosques of varying size. Six bridges bound the city together across Neretva, one of several rivers in the region that at times have marked the frontier of Christian and Muslim areas. Too tempting as targets for the besiegers, almost all of them were bombed to pieces.

The reconstruction that is taking place today is significant, thanks mainly to the international contributions that are flowing in due in no small part to the particular symbolic status this place has earned. So far, 17 mosques have been rebuilt. The Croats, however, have chosen to build one large cathedral. It is clearly exaggerated in size, and hardly a feast on the eye. Furthermore - and here the irony is clear - if anything, it looks like an oversized mosque. The Croats have also placed a large cross on a hilltop southeast of the city, from where many rockets were fired during the war. The Muslims are considering building a large Islamic centre. The situation remains fraught with symbolism, as I will be reminded of later.

What kind of Muslims?

Mario Vrankic is systematically trying to create an unsympathetic image of the Muslims. He claims that, politically, the local Bosniaks are actually more influenced by Iran than by their next-door neighbour Turkey. It is true that *mujahideen* came to Bosnia during the war, partly as a consequence of the Western weapons embargo on all countries in the region, which hit the ill-equipped Bosnians the hardest, but these warriors never entered Mostar. The Muslims here are very moderate, and fewer veils are seen than in most Western European cities.

The Bosniaks have a 70 % majority in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina now (not counting the Republika Srpska), and it seems the Croats dare feeling the pressure. Yet it is difficult to feel sorry for them. They retain substantial backing from Zagreb, and there is no denying who suffered most during the war: 70 % of the fatalities were Bosniaks.

Most Bosniaks I talked to place a lot of faith in the International Court in The Hague (ICTY), which is seeking to bring war criminals to justice. Even if the process is slow, they feel it is clearing the air, and they take every new conviction as a symbolic justification. But Mario Vrankic accuses the Office of the High Representative (OHR) – the highest authority of Bosnia-Herzegovina – of having taken unlawful possession of 50 transmitters that belonged to the TV-station he used to work for. He also rebukes the former head of the OHR, the Briton Paddy Ashdown, for performing the traditional British imperial policy of "divide and rule".

- Traditionally, the Serbs have been friends of the British. They got their reward for this with the founding of the Republika Srpska, even if this was clearly a consequence of their wilful policy of "ethnic cleansing". The extradition of a couple of their political leaders was the only price they had to pay.

The international community

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) also has a clear presence in Mostar. They work with education, human rights, democratisation, and reforms of the public sector. The OSCE-employed Richard Medic is Australian, but has a Croatian mother, Serbian father and two Muslim half sisters. He seems surprised when I tell him about Mario Vrankic's views.

- Paddy Ashdown achieved a reform and merger of the city's administration, despite serious resistance. He managed to break up the six or seven administrative units that were divided solely along ethnic lines. Mostar now operates with one single budget once again, and the city is back to sporting just one ambulance service and one fire brigade. One of the most serious problems after the war was related to the large number of confiscated apartments. That has almost been solved.

- Some problems still remain, of course. Sport clubs and cultural institutions remain separate, and the unification of the educational system is a slow process. Also the residents still argue about such symbolic things as street names. But in general, and this is the best thing of all, people can now move around freely. They can go shopping on the Croatian side during the day, and then for a stroll on the Muslim side in the evening. There is no violence at all, not even threats. Security has been restored!

- The state administration is divided into 13 horizontal levels, to prevent the Bosniaks from obtaining too much power, Richard continues. - Along with the double administration at the city level, this has proved a drain on public finances. Mostar does have revenues from tourism, but hardly any industry at all anymore, and unemployment is running sky high. There are no statistics for Mostar alone, but for Bosnia and Herzegovina it stands at around 40 %.

Norwegian dialogue

Despite the peaceful day-to-day existence, the reality of Mostar today consists of a political polarization along the highlighted religious fault lines. One countermove to this development is the Norwegian “Nansen Dialogue Centre”, with its office situated on the main street. Originally it fell under the auspices of the headquarters in Lillehammer, but it is now quite independent.

The centre organizes workshops that bring together groups from both sides of the conflict, most often youths, with the aim to encourage dialogue. Project coordinator Vernes Voloder tells me about the most frequently recurring pattern:

- The first day is dominated by silence, the second by quarrelling and accusations, but already from the third day the teenagers start looking for common denominators, typically music. They discover each other’s sense of humour, and friendships flourish. I’m afraid to make this sound like a cheap paperback, but some also fall in love. This is really some achievement, because the young are often almost poisoned by their parents’ portrayals of the enemy, Vernes says.

Unifying forces

In Vernes’ mind, Bosnia and Herzegovina gained reunification during a football match, when the recently established multi-ethnic national team played against Denmark in 1997. Many of the best Bosnian players of Croatian and Serbian descent had been lured away to play for their external new “ethnic homelands”, but Bosnia’s new manager succeeded in convincing a lot of the second best to represent Bosnia and Hercegovina. Vernes tells the story of how “new Bosnia” win 2-0 in Copenhagen, but the real magic occurs in the 72nd minute of the game, when a Serb player is substituted for a Croat. The Serb makes the sign of the cross with three fingers, while the Croat does the same with two, before they shake hands triumphantly. The predominantly Bosniak spectators cheer them wildly.

Vernes Voloder is today 29 years old. During the war, his Muslim father was ratted on and betrayed by a Croatian colleague, and had to spend six tough months in prison. They had worked together for ten years. One day after the war they accidentally ran into each other again on the street, with Vernes accompanying his dad. The informer tried to maintain his poker face, talking about everyday things, but in the end he couldn’t keep up the façade any longer; quite suddenly he broke into tears. Vernes’ dad remained upright for a minute, then grabbed him by the arm and escorted him into a nearby café. Copious amounts of brandy were consumed that evening, Vernes recalls, but he certainly learnt something about forgiveness.

Many big hearts like this are needed to make everything as before in Mostar and Bosnia.