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Sarajevo's Spirit Today

Irina Lagunina

Irina Lagunina of RFE/RL's Russian Service spoke to Broz during a recent visit to Sarajevo.

Lagunina: You are originally from Belgrade but moved to Sarajevo permanently after the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Why did you decide to move?

Svetlana Broz: I lived in Belgrade, which was a European metropolis 30 years ago. But unfortunately in the meantime, due to the politics and the wars which were waged on the territory of former Yugoslavia, Belgrade somehow lost its spirit. I worked during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina; in fact, half of the wartime I spent in Bosnia-Herzegovina. And after the war I dedicated a lot of my time to working in Bosnia and in Sarajevo.

And I realized that Sarajevo somehow kept the spirit of the city in spite of the fact that the citizens of Sarajevo passed through the worst of the siege during the war of 1992-95. Not knowing how to live in a city without spirit, I decided to move from Belgrade to Sarajevo. Of course, a lot of my work, my research was connected to Bosnia-Herzegovina and this is why it was easier to make such kind of decision.

Lagunina: And what kind of spirit did you find here in Sarajevo?

Broz: Those people who lived before the war in Sarajevo, Sarajevans who were born here, who passed through the siege, they kept their feeling for others, they kept the compassion, they kept [their] understanding of everything. And it is something that I really appreciate.

Of course, in every city a lot changed after the war. A lot of people left the city, a lot of new people came to the city, etc., etc. And it happened with all cities of former Yugoslavia, not only with Sarajevo. But this specific spirit that Sarajevans had — their sense of humor, their tolerance, their capacity to understand everything — is something that I really appreciate very much. And this is why I moved in October of 1999 from Belgrade to Sarajevo.

Lagunina: You spoke about the compassion of Sarajevans. I saw a lot of this in the city during the siege. But do you think it still exists today?

Broz: Yes, it still exists. Maybe it's much more hidden than during the war, which is understandable. During the war, people were completely equal. They were in the same danger — all day, all night. For years [they were] in the situation of having nothing. And they shared whatever little they did have. And if they had nothing, they shared their compassion.

And that's why they were the best neighbors, that's why they were the people who showed their civil courage to resist, to oppose, to disobey. And they managed, they survived. After the war, it's logical that people would start fighting for a better life and lose a part of this neighborhood feeling that they nurtured during the war. But still, if you gave a chance to talk to old Sarajevans, with the people who lived before the war in Sarajevo and who stayed in Sarajevo, they are the same after all. They kept the spirit of the city.

Lagunina: But Bosnia remains split along ethnic lines. Many Serbs have moved to Republika Srpska or to East Sarajevo. Some even say that the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, who is on trial in The Hague for genocide, actually won the war because the divisions are still there. There is even some segregation in schools.

Broz: I work very often in schools, and I can tell you that in Sarajevo it is impossible to find segregation in schools. It is possible, unfortunately, in some places — such as Mostar, Stolac or Gorni Vakuv — but not in Sarajevo. I lectured in practically all secondary schools in Sarajevo and I never saw segregation. But if you are talking about the percentage of inhabitants, it has changed since the census of 1991 — although nobody has made a census in the meantime.

It's clear that a lot of people left the city and a lot of new people came. And there are changes. But those people who stayed in Sarajevo will not accept any segregation because they lived together before the war, during the war, and they stayed to live together after the war. Maybe those new [arrivals] who came from different places — who may be as victims of ethnic cleansing, etc., and who became the new inhabitants of Sarajevo — they brought some feeling of frustration.

Lagunina: Twenty years after the start of this conflict and 16 years after it ended, the countries that emerged from the breakup of Yugoslavia have more or less normalized their relations. Ties between Belgrade and Sarajevo are growing. Relations between Sarajevo and Zagreb are expanding. But within Bosnia itself, the opposite appears to be the case. Sometimes I have the feeling that there are stronger relations between Sarajevo and Belgrade than between Sarajevo and Banja Luka. Is this true?

Broz: It should be true, but this is thanks to the politicians more than thanks to the people who live here in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Politicians in Bosnia-Herzegovina are very often playing their old games with the nationalism card. And that's why I call them war friends and postwar friends — all of them together.

They made one deal: not to make a deal about anything because they would like to keep the status quo. Otherwise, if we change things they will be in danger, they will not have power anymore, and many of them will face justice in the courts. That's why even 20 years after the war they are in the position, thanks to the people who voted

for them, to keep artificial tensions in this country. [This is why] I am sure that at the moment when they disappear from the political stage in this country, people will continue to live more or less in a normal circumstances. But politicians do not allow them to do so.

Lagunina: So why do people continue to vote for them?

Broz: It's very easy to understand if you think about intimidation as the most important process which was used by the politicians to keep the people quiet and to make them vote for them endlessly. Those politicians who created the wars in former Yugoslavia, who waged the wars, and who signed the peace accords at the end realized that they can realize their goals by intimidating the people. They were doing so five years before the first war started in former Yugoslavia.

I was an eyewitness. They were doing so through the media which was the best tool for intimidating millions of people. They did so during the war, of course and they continue to do so 16 years after the war was ended in Bosnia-Herzegovina. If you follow the preelection slogans, then you can discover that it's more or less about [this]: "Vote for us or you will be wiped out." In other words, they always intimidate their voters [to convince them] that it's better to vote for them again than for somebody else because in this case maybe a new war might happen and the people can suffer as they did in the previous war. This is a dirty game but a very successful one, unfortunately.

And that's why people are afraid. And when you talk to them, their reaction is more or less the same no matter where they are: In Republika Srpska, in the [Bosniak-Croat] federation, they say, "It's better to vote for those who showed what they can [do for us] than for others who I'm not sure what they can do for us." As long as we have such an enormous amount of fear among voters, we will not be able to change anything and those politicians who are in power will be very happy. And the people will be very unhappy.

Lagunina: Why is there still so much fear in Bosnia-Herzegovina?

Broz: Fear is the most impressive feeling in Bosnia-Herzegovina, wherever you are. You know, at least five years before 1991, when the first war started, I witnessed how media all around Yugoslavia intimidated people by abusing the history, using the myths, repeating thousands of times per day that "your previous neighbor and friend might become your enemy, as happened 600 years ago…."

They used [Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph] Goebbels' theory that a lie repeated [a thousand] times becomes truth. And they were very successful in doing so. After five years people in Yugoslavia started to think, "Maybe my neighbor can really become my enemy, and maybe the war which is now starting is justified by that, so we should defend ourselves; otherwise they will put us in danger." This "we" and "they" becomes the most important thing, and people were all very afraid. Politicians managed to provide a critical amount of fear among people.

Lagunina: What do you think about the young generation that was born after the war? I heard both in Banja Luka and here, in Sarajevo, that they don't know each other,

they are separated, and they are even more nationalistic or ethnically orientated than the generation that lived through the war. Is this true?

Broz: I think it might become true one day if we, as members of society, do not do enough to change it. Because those young people who are 16 now — they have no chance to meet each other. They are separated according to their school plans, according to their curriculum, according to the lack of money for traveling, and, of course, through the influence of the particular society in which they live. But there are chances to change this situation.

You know, the NGO that I run organizes an eight-day school of civic courage, inviting young secondary-school and university students from all parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as from the whole region of former Yugoslavia. And they spend eight days together.

Lagunina: Why do you call it “civic courage”?

Broz: Because we realize that the people in this region have a lack of civic courage, which we define as capacity for resisting, opposing, and disobeying all those who abuse their power for their own purposes and violate laws and violate the human rights of others. There are so many of them — among the politicians, among the professors of the universities, teachers in schools, my colleague physicians, the police, judiciary — all parts of the society are corrupt. And so many phenomena are negative in the society that it means that people need to have civic courage to stand up and to fight for their rights — to say no in the face of evil, to say, “No, I don’t want to be exploited, to become a victim of your own purposes and interests just because you have power and I don’t.” And this is why we developed a program to teach the young people to resist, to understand their role in the society. Our young people have no understanding of the fact that they do have a place in the society and a role in their own lives. They are always slaves of somebody else’s ideas. They are brought up like this. And somebody should tell them this. And we are doing so.

Lagunina: What is it like when they first come?

Broz: It is interesting when you follow them. First of all, we always invite at least two from one society because we realized that if we invite one, then it is hard for one to come. Young people are afraid, as well as their parents. So when they come from their cities, towns, villages, they spend two hours talking among themselves, being afraid of others, because everything is new for them. We have had so far over 300 young people who passed through our schools of civic courage and 75 percent of them were in Sarajevo for the first time, which is important. So of course they were afraid. But after the introduction during which they are supposed to talk to those whom they did not know, they very suddenly realize that they are the same, that they have the same goals, the same dreams, the same problems; that they have the same quantities of lies told by their parents, their teachers, their societies. And having the same dreams, they realize that they should work together to overcome those problems and to realize their dreams. Which is wonderful! After eight days they are all asking us if there is any possibility to stay with the next group which will come because they don’t want to go home. And when they come back to their societies, they are the most powerful fighters

for the truth and for the changes. They are ready to say to their teachers, the directors of the school, their parents, their authorities, “You were lying to us, it’s not true. We are not different; we have so many things in common.” They stayed friends, they visit each other, they break those prejudices in their local communities by inviting to Banja Luka somebody from Sarajevo or vise-versa. Of course there is resistance in their societies, but they are capable of fighting this resistance and to manage finally what they want — just to live a normal life.

Lagunina: What do you consider to be your grandfather’s greatest legacy?

Broz: For me, it is the antifascism. And I would like to think that for other people it is the same. Tito was one of the very famous antifascists before and during the second world war. This is why I was raised in this atmosphere — I was very sensitive to any type of fascistic ideology or ideas. Unfortunately, we were all victims of fascistic ideas that are still present in our societies and people do not resist enough, in my view.

Svetlana Broz, the granddaughter of former Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito, has been has been battling ethnic intolerance for two decades. A cardiologist and a native of Belgrade, she came to Bosnia-Herzegovina during the 1992-95 war to do humanitarian work. She moved to Sarajevo permanently in 2000 and took Bosnian citizenship in 2004. Broz runs the NGO Gariwo, which facilitates ethnic tolerance. Her 2002 book *Good People In An Evil Time* chronicled acts of goodwill by Bosnians of all ethnic backgrounds during the war.

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