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Train in the Grass

Gojko Berić

Trains are the finest metaphor for present-day Bosnia-Herzegovina. Three and a half years after Dayton the imaginary state is still slumbering between the covers of the famous Accord, and life is for the most part going on without it and despite it. It's much the same with the trains. Hundreds of kilometre of tracks are overgrown with grass, with wrecked, rust-corroded wagons abandoned haphazard along them and in derelict sidings. Some funds have been allocated for the railways from the international coffers from which money pours into the bottomless Bosnian well, to get the trains moving at least on sections that are still usable. But the trains are still standing idle. True, here and there a goods train with some special load rumbles along and comes hurriedly back. I hear that the odd passenger train is leaving Sarajevo, too. They say that one of these trains even goes as far as Mostar and Čapljina, and that a locomotive with a single carriage trundles along to Visoko and back. The state is in tatters, and so are the railways.

The clatter of trains is a sound that is no longer heard around Bosnia. By day, people living along the tracks would look up at the sound, and at night they would fall asleep to that sound and wake up again to it in the morning. When we say train, we think of passenger trains. That was what the railways were for. The trains occupied an important place, sometimes the most important, in everyone's life. I doubt if there is a single journalist who has not written at least one report from a train. For Bosnians the train was the biggest talking-shop, they would start a spontaneous conversation. People confided in one another in the train as nowhere else. The train was a great travelling beehive in which complete strangers offered one another cigarettes, plum brandy from the bottle, and roast chicken. Love was sudden and brief in the train, but always memorable. At the terminal, the traces of our journey were left in the compartments: bones picked clean in greasy paper, ash and empty cigarette packets, empty drink cans, apple cores, and newspapers that had been read and abandoned.

Each train journey was in its own way unrepeatable. And now a generation is growing up in Bosnia that may not even see a train before they are twenty, let alone travel in one.

And even if by some miracle the trains were to start running to every destination tomorrow, there would still be very few passengers, and every compartment would have at least two SFOR soldiers accompanying it. What I mean is that travelling by

train is no longer a matter for the railways. The layer of rust that has settled on the railways is directly proportional to freedom of movement in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The people who divided this country ethnically know what they're doing in relation to trains too. For if the trains were to begin moving again throughout the country, filled with passengers without fear of any kind, Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats would again begin to mingle with one another. And nothing is more dangerous for the guardians of the national sheepfolds, the rulers over our divided and broken spirits. All they need is a single train, the one that runs along the single track of their xenophobic minds.

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