

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

Bosnian Rivers

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“Bosanske reke / Bosnian Rivers” is a family game, which we would play while traveling to the seaside by car, especially while chocking on the dust as we were crossing the craggy roads of Romanija mountain. I continued playing the game later in my life: even now, it is a pleasant pastime on my travels to Bosnia. The game is played on an “ousting” basis. You start by putting ten rivers on the list and continue playing until the champions reach the level of thirty rivers. After that, another, similar game—the mountains—is played. Needless to say, the game can be played with and in any part of the former country. One advice for beginners: you can never make a mistake with the Bistrica river.

The first part of the trip, from Dubrovnik to Sarajevo, ended up badly; everyone was mostly silent, since we left the town of Trebinje with the sight of a brand new billboard which read “We want Šešelj”¹ and the last sight from Gacko was a black-and-white al fresco portrait of Ratko Mladić;² however, the inscription on it was “Market”, covering the entire facade of a building. Nonetheless, the worst was yet to come – the Sutjeska National Park. Some thirty years ago, this highly fabled place of an important, but successfully surmounted defeat of the Partisan army was always full of buses, tour groups, unions, and voices. All of this was perhaps slightly unbearable, but that’s not such a big deal – at least, it would always be swarming with young people. Even the idea of a “place of remembrance” with sport and leisure facilities was not meaningless: it, in fact, contributed to an easier registration of land under the state register. One would expect that an infrastructure of that kind could be used at a different time period, without any big problems in the transfer of meaning; but, not in the country of newly-proclaimed saints, and war criminals. Enveloped in tall leaves of grass, the monument in the Sutjeska National Park is now impenetrable. All that’s left are the frames of hotels, administrative buildings, youth houses, and they are all frighteningly forsaken. It would be hard to find a better, real-world example for my favorite docu-fiction show “Life after People.” While the new signs inform visitors of an “ecological” area, the old ones are still there to confuse those who had wandered off in this area after following the signs. The saddest sight of all are lamps, the architectural pride of the 60s: all of them smashed, stolen, bent and rusty. Or perhaps things are not that bad: the archeology of “the place of remembrance” provides a perfect insight into the invention of Republika Srpska.

Two weeks after the floods, the trip from Sarajevo to Slavonski Brod—which is the only route advisable—put an end to all communication, but also games. One is forced to use the byway across the town of Maglaj, by bypassing Dobož. It is a higher coast, which was exposed to less damage; however, it is only from here that the real dimensions of horrid things can be determined. The road itself is flanked by mounds of garbage, mainly furniture, domestic appliances, dishes, mattresses, carpets, rags, bottles..., and so on. Some sections of the road are surrounded by mine warnings every 20 meters. Tree tops, at least those which remained intact, are now decorated by the waste dumped by rivers. Plastic is the major part of this waste. Hundreds of hectares of land are covered with dark mud. Water has washed away a handful of graves, looking to damage all religions equally, as well as atheists. Next to the railway, a two-story storage bunker tumbled on one side, while the demolished houses are hardly noticeable under the pile of debris. Years ago, the river Bosna—adorned with waste—with the banks that are hardly accessible, gave away a ghastly appearance for a long time. Now, its water level is four times higher, but the banks are completely clean from waste. The river looks exactly as it might have looked a century or more ago, with clean banks, at a place of its retirement, with virginal shoals made of gray pebbles. It has successfully purged itself from all the filth, including mines, with which she was being suffocated. But now, it tosses down new water. I doubt there is a plan to preserve the river in its new form, and to lower the inflicted damages through the utilization of possible advantages. How long will the new river Bosna persist, until the world around her starts destroying her anew: how much longer is she going to take it?

Translated with notes by Maja Pašović

Notes

1. Vojislav Šešelj, founder of the Serbian Radical Party, and former Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia (from 1998-2000), is currently being prosecuted for war crimes and crimes against humanity before the Hague Tribunal (ICTY). ↩
2. Ratko Mladić, former military leader of the Bosnian Serb army which committed crimes against humanity and the notorious genocide in Srebrenica, has been on trial before the ICTY since May 2012. ↩

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