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Riding Along the Language River

A Bulgarian Writer on Tour

Alek Popov

In the Austrian town of Krems, Alek Popov reports on a reading by a Bulgarian writer who just happens to be – himself. An opportunity to consider the lived reality of cultural exchange and cultural difference I

From the poster, an unshaven individual is watching me with narrowed eyes and something like a smile, leaving open a wide range of interpretations. He is wearing a sand-coloured shirt underneath which a skull and crossbones T-shirt can be seen. The poster is pinned to the little gate facing the small wine bar where I dropped in for a glass of chilled white. At this hour of the day the streets of the little historical town of Krems, Lower Austria, are almost entirely deserted. A couple of houses along, the blue Danube lingers, still narrow-waisted and clear. As a matter of fact you could hardly say that the streets are more populated during the rest of the day – if you don't count the sporadic herds of tourists. The locals prefer a quiet and invisible life behind the well-kept baroque facades. The man in the poster is definitely not local. His name is Slavic. Discreetly identified (in brackets): *Bulgaria*. The local public will have the pleasure of meeting him at 7 pm in the hall of the Literature House. Admission is free. He will probably read something. In what language? one wonders. It occurs to me that I could attend the event if I want to. Most probably translation will be provided either in German or English. I have nothing to do this evening, anyway. Wine will be served at the end, most probably. Krems lies in the picturesque valley of Wachau, where the best white wine in Central Europe is produced.

I turn and order another glass. I don't know why but it seems to me that the owner is looking at me strangely. "You fool!", I swear to myself. The whole magic evaporates. I pay angrily and leave.

In reality, though, it doesn't happen like that. The owner doesn't say anything. If he noticed the poster at all, which could have pricked his eyes out, the connection between it and the person at his table has most assuredly escaped him. He brings the wine and hides behind the counter with the same official smile. The magic is definitely blown.

"You fool!" Now I swear for real.

The valley of wine, Wachau, where I am going to spend this month, and the valley of the language where my permanent address is, have quite a lot in common. People know each other, distances are short, rumours fly fast, news comes slow and the river is a decisive economic and cultural factor. Through the one flows the Danube, through the other, the high-pressure stream of the Bulgarian language. Along the Danube one can go as far as Bulgaria. As it turns out, along the river of the Bulgarian language one can go to Wachau! But while Kremsfolk are generally content and grateful people, in the valley of the Bulgarian language people in general curse their fate.

Where lies the root of their discontent?

The language river. Until very recently the inhabitants of my valley lived with one deceitful feeling. For well-known historical reasons they had no need to leave the well-guarded boundaries of their cultural enclave very often. News from the outside world reached them mainly on the current of the language river. Either as oral legend, or as text. And very rarely as personal experience.

It was not as if people were ignorant, quite the opposite: as far as geography was concerned, for example, they were and still are better-oriented than the inhabitants of more wide-open places. Concerning the cultural layers of human history there was also a relatively clear paradigm. In a sense it wasn't such a big secret that the Earth is round, the Nile flows into the Mediterranean and Everest is the highest peak on Earth. We knew who Aristotle was, Leonardo da Vinci, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus – and even Natalie Sarraute had swum by somehow on the *nouveau roman's* good-for-nothing raft... But this world was not real, at the end of the day. It resembled a fairy tale about long-ago countries and eras. The only thing that remained real was the valley. Here things were authentic. You could see them, touch them, smell them. As though words written in foreign languages left no trace in the space. As though Bulgarian words had weight. You could be punished for them, big time. That was not the centre of the world. *It was the world.*

Global anonymity. This collective solipsism only cracked at the beginning of the 1990s. Tentatively at first, then more daringly, the inhabitants of the valley began to step outside its borders. It turned out that the world outside was as real as theirs. To see, touch, and smell. In some sense even more real than the one they had inhabited so far. And that world knew nothing, or almost nothing, about theirs – if you don't count a handful of experts. That world didn't know where the Iskar flows nor how high the Musala is. Hadn't heard of Vazov or of Botev, nor about the whole frosty chain of spiritual giants who surrounded their valley. Unfairness personified! That's the way the pendulum of collective oblivion swayed from one extreme to the other: people of the valley felt doubts about their own existence.

Discovering the world, they discovered the phenomenon of global anonymity as well. You have been somebody till now, and suddenly you become nobody. The distance is only one step. But the change of status is dramatic. Take the following case. In the 70s of the last century, at the peak of the Cold War, the state sends one of its well-known authors to France for a couple of months. To get civilized, to look around, to breathe a different air. And maybe with the perfidious idea of making him understand his place in the world and stop waving his nose in the air... And that's what happened. The living legend wandered around Paris for a week or two and was annoyed by the fact that nobody was paying him the attention he 'deserved'. He came back like a sulking child and went home. He slammed the door on the world, so to speak. If you behave like I don't exist, so will I! It seems the ghost of global anonymity turned out to be more frightening than the suffocating embrace of homebred censorship.

A world of provinces. Something similar, but on a grander scale, happened during the 90s when the borders opened. The humiliation, the shock, the insecurity drove many to seek shelter ever deeper in the valley's jungle, where the sediment of centuries continued to produce mirages. The nostalgia for the Bulgarian universe was comparable to the feeling of loss which the colonial empires lived through during the 60s. Paradoxically, the opening and the closing of borders can lead to the same result. Which somehow proves once again that the problem of identity is not related to geography alone. The former colonial empires reacted to this challenge with the attempt to bring into their metropolises particles of the world they had possessed in the past. The fan of different cultures which was spreading wider and wider, together with the flow of immigrants from

the former territories, somehow compensated for the loss of the territories themselves. But how would the people from the valley react, those who had never governed foreign lands? Where would they import material from, to reconstruct their cracked universe?

Some things simply cannot be repaired: especially illusions. We have to somehow live with that thought. In principle, the inhabitants of all valleys are inclined to solipsism. Most probably the people of the fertile Wachau once thought the world ended in their valley. Just like the people from the little villages hidden in the folds of the Alps. Sooner or later, though, they understood that it is not exactly like that. Behind the hill there is another valley, where another river flows, and beyond that a plain, then a town, then a mountain, then a valley, coast, sea and so on. The *universum* is a depressing abstraction. The world consists of provinces. If we learned to accept it at least partially, maybe we wouldn't be so lost. Everyone comes from somewhere, everyone brings their own story. Practically nobody is anonymous. Ideas may be global, but people remain local beings. Attached and attaching. Otherwise it is impossible for the world to survive.

A strange divide. In the cosy little hall of the Literaturhaus, twenty people listen carefully. Including me. Somebody else's voice reads aloud in a foreign language. My text. I feel strangely divided, as if I am present at my own birth or my wedding. Participant and observer at the same time. Some part of me is here, and smiles awkwardly at the public, as if it had acquired somebody else's identity. The other stays somewhere there, in the valley of language, and stolidly stares at the flowing river. Something tells me this feeling will never go away. Once familiar with the wide world, the former will never want to come home to the valley. While the latter will always stay there. One will wander, the other will wait.

Most probably, beneath the sign of this internal split flows the entire culture of the valley. Between the alluring voice of the sirens and the call to return is born the art of searching and solitude. In the time of epic screen versions of the battle of Troy, Thermopylae and Mordor, the tales of Odysseus and the brave little hobbit Bilbo Baggins continue. Human, maybe all too human. ─

Alek Popov (b. 1966) is one of Bulgaria's leading authors and has written short stories, essays and plays which have been translated into many languages. His first novel *Mission London* (2001) was based on his colourful experiences as Bulgarian cultural attaché in London, and became a bestseller. He has published several short story collections in Bulgaria, and his latest novel *The Black Box* (2007) will be published in German translation in 2008.



In front of the monument "For the Serb People" in New Belgrade, Giulia FioCCA and Laia Solé



My “Yugoslavia” Of Lands and Literature

Ilma Rakusa

Although she lives in Switzerland, the geography and literature of “Yugoslavia” are an important part of Ilma Rakusa's heritage. In this personal essay, she reflects on how that legacy has changed over time |

For as long as I can remember, the country called South Slavia – for that is what Yugoslavia means – has belonged to me. As a child, I lived for a while in Ljubljana, and even when we moved to Trieste, we regularly visited my father's Slovenian relatives. My father also took my mother and me along on business trips to Zagreb and Belgrade. That was an adventure, for we travelled by car, and the roads were bad. Once, on the way to Zagreb at night, we ran over a rabbit, and a little while later, we were stopped by a farmer looking for a fugitive thief. These night-time excitements were ingrained in my childhood memory more strongly than day-lit Zagreb, with its neat and proper old town. But I experienced Belgrade – true to its name – as a white city at the confluence of the Danube and the Sava, flooded with light, rambling, tolerant. I had my picture taken at the Kalemegdan fortress, and in the evening, I got to go to a folklore opera. There is no question that my enthusiasm for South Slavic folk music began then and there.

Lost paradise? Long years of forced abstinence followed. We lived in Switzerland, with refugee papers. My father did not want to risk a trip to Yugoslavia. So we waited until we became Swiss citizens. I was eighteen when the moment finally arrived. I immediately went to visit my grandparents in Maribor. And right after that, I went with a cousin and a Viennese aunt to Dalmatia. The coast road from Rijeka to Dubrovnik, as winding as it was varied, was a revelation of colour and light. And then the chalk-white cities: Zadar, Šibenik, Split, Trogir, Dubrovnik, with their churches and city walls and palaces and squares. It was as if I had discovered a lost paradise.

Sea and stone. Stone hewn by Romans, Venetians, Croats, shining under my soles, like on the Stradun in Dubrovnik, the old Republic of Ragusa. There, my cousin and I strolled along as if intoxicated, as if waiting to perform in front of the backdrops of the palaces.

And: goodbye. The return trip took us into the back country. To Mostar in Herzegovina, where the Orient suddenly caught up with us: mosques, bazaars, elegant Ottoman bridges, a tale from *A Thousand and One Nights* – it all seemed worlds away from Dubrovnik. The contrast was electrifying. Then our route took us through the canyons and over the mountains of the Balkans, past minarets and Bogomil graves to the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo. We arrived at the Hotel Europa and hurried straight to Baščaršija, to the heart of the Old Town. My eyes could not get their fill. Carpets, silver jewellery, tea rooms, burek stands, an old caravanserai. And in the middle of this cheerful tumult the calls of the muezzin. My cousin and I were in a daze. Were we travelling through time? Or a far-off continent?

Discoveries. I realized then what I loved so much about Yugoslavia: the plurality; the coexistence of opposites. In Sarajevo, it was enough to cross the street – that's how close Orient and Occident were to each other. And all those varied sounds and melodies. My ears could not get their fill. In Macedonia, where I landed years later, I encountered not only a new language but also a music I had not known before, full of semitones, with uneven rhythms for elaborate dancing. The saints in the Byzantine church frescoes of Ohrid and Sveti Naum looked at me seriously, but the evening Oro dances overflowed with cheerful ex-

uberance. In the villages in Kosovo, it sounded different, although I would not have known how to describe that difference. But I did not understand Albanian, anyway.

Surprising, inscrutable Yugoslavia. My attempts to make it mine were appropriately eclectic. In the early eighties, contacts I made through Slavic Studies often took me to symposia in Zagreb and Dubrovnik. Along with literary scholars, I met numerous writers. And so began my real Yugoslavian adventure: in literature. It changed not only my perception of “South Slavia”, but my life. With happenstance playing a not insignificant role.

The nationalist catastrophe. “Do you know Danilo Kiš’s novel *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich?*” A. F. asked me. “Sensational!” He was not exaggerating. I bought the book and read it. Later, I translated it into German. Even today, I know of no more gruesome and still so poetically compact reckoning with the “revolution that ate its own children”. Kiš was primarily aiming at Stalinism. But the cultural apparatchiks in Belgrade sensed something politically explosive and staged a scandal, under the pretence of plagiarism. Kiš defended himself in the overpowering book-length essay *Anatomy Lesson*, in which, among other things, he prophetically warned against nationalisms: “Nationalism is, above all, paranoia. A collective and individual paranoia... Further, nationalism is – and not merely in its etymological meaning – the last ideology and demagogy that appeals to the people.”

Anatomy Lesson came out in 1978, Tito died in 1980, and a little while later, a clash about language broke out between Belgrade and Zagreb – an evil omen. Kiš’s warnings faded, unheard. In the fall of 1989, Kiš succumbed to cancer; he was spared the collapse of Yugoslavia and the nationalist insanity that led to war.

I have only one thing to say about the Yugoslavian war: it was a catastrophe whose consequences will be with us for decades. Even now, I still hear terrible things from Bosnia, alarming news from Vojvodina. My friends in Zagreb have been scattered to the four winds. Nothing is what it once was. But my reservations about what was once called Yugoslavia have abated, not least thanks to Dževad Karahasan and his wife, who took me by the hand in the autumn of 2002 and led me back to Sarajevo. It was not like a fairy tale, no. On the way from Graz to Sarajevo, we crossed umpteen borders, driving past burned-out villages and bombed-out churches. A landscape in ruins. But the Karahasans’ apartment, despite having been damaged by shelling during the war, met me with white carpets, cosily. “Heal me,” I said to my friends, “by showing me the city’s wounds.” They understood. They showed me the Jewish cemetery (where the Serbs had positioned their forces); showed me the burned-out UNIS tower, the de-

stroyed National Library, the dangerous intersections, and the market where a bloodbath was perpetrated by a sniper; they showed me the theatre and the mosques as sites of resistance and the Alifakovac cemetery with the graves of Bosnians who had fallen during the war. We walked for hours, with breaks for tea or burek, or we talked with a carpet merchant who was wild about Spinoza. “Life goes on,” said Dragana. And Dževad nodded meaningfully.

Utopia in literature. Since then, my motto has been “next year in Sarajevo”. But I don’t quite live up to it. For my utopian “Yugoslavia” has long since made its way into literature. I find it in Krleža, Andrić, and Crnjanski, in Kiš, Albahari, and Karahasan. Without them, of course, the real “South Slavia” would also be hard to understand, especially as they are the ones who oppose collective amnesia with cultural memory. Ivo Andrić in an undated notebook entry about Sarajevo: “*Oriental, Gandhi-like poverty and squalor. Many items are luxuries, although they would be luxurious nowhere else. The coolest and healthiest water in the world. The most remarkable houses, which, whether old or new, look dilapidated and close to collapse. They seem unhealthy, but one can live in them for a long time, quite pleasantly, more than almost anywhere else. In the language of the men and women, the characteristic vowels without colour or clear boundaries, which is why the children’s speech sounds like careless cooing. – Everything buried in silence.*” ─

Translated from the German by Andrew Shields

Ilma Rakusa was born in 1946 in Rimavská Sobota (Slovakia), to a Hungarian mother and a Slovenian father. She spent her childhood in Budapest, Ljubljana, and Trieste. She studied Slavic Literature and French Literature and lives in Zurich, where she is a writer and translator, as well as a lecturer at the University of Zurich. She has published numerous translations from Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Hungarian, and French into German and written articles for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and *Die Zeit*. In 2003, she received the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize. Recent publications: *Langsamer!* (Literaturverlag Droschl, Graz 2005); *Durch Schnee. Erzählungen und Prosaminiaturen* (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. 2006); *Zur Sprache gehen. Poetikvorlesungen* (Thelem Verlag, Dresden 2006). In English: *A Farewell to Everything*, trans. Andrew Willard and Andrew Shields (Shearsman Publications, Exeter, UK, 2005). For more information: www.ilmarakusa.info



Entrance to the Arizona Market, between Zagreb and Novi Sad, Peter Moertenboeck and Helge Mooshammer



Poetry in Hard Times

An Artist's Response to the War in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Ferida Duraković

During the siege of Sarajevo, art and culture became important strategies for resisting the inhumanity of war. Ferida

Duraković transforms the lessons of the war into suggestions for building a lasting peace I

For Yvana Enzler

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992–1995 answered dozens of my questions, but it raised thousands of new ones. The most important among them – *why the war?* – shall never be answered. The great Hölderlin's question, "*What good are poets in hard times?*", helped me to instinctively adjust during the first months of the war to the fact that water, bread (and cigarettes!) were far more important than any of the fancy words like democracy, human rights, open society, compromise, cooperation, tolerance, diversity... Then something inexplicable happened. A bitter need for freedom – how else to explain the arts during wartime? – confirmed that "*We need bread, but we need roses too,*" as Judy Collins sings. We artists in the war setting wanted to prove to the world that we were more than sniper targets; that cultured people were being exterminated here; that, moreover, the self-image of the international community was being murdered here. Culture and the arts were our weapons. Intellectuals from the rest of the world were coming to the devastated cities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and they were shocked by the artistic energy they encountered, which they were unable to produce themselves. Through our art works, the world became familiar with concentration camps, ethnic cleansing, rape, the destruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar, as well as of the necessity of taking some real action in 1995.

And what did we all gain from the war?
Did the aggressor prove his claim of being better than those he attacked? No, he did not. On the contrary.
Did those who were killing innocent civilians prove their right to their own identity, the right to be different? They did – but in doing so they violently removed the identity of the Others.

Was that worth 200,000 human lives?

Today in Bosnia, while the war is still being waged in nationalistic minds, one forgotten memory comes back to me. In the heat of the war, late 1993 or early 1994, a group of Swiss parliamentarians and intellectuals, escorted by UNPROFOR, entered Sarajevo. They came to hear ideas from Sarajevo intellectuals about the future of the Bosnian state, as well as to convey to us their political and historical experiences in a lastingly stable and successful European country.

I remember it was cold and I was afraid. We were sitting in an unsafe conference room on the fourth floor, too close to the roof. I wondered what to do if the mortars started to fall – not on us (the guilty ones?) but on those ambassadors of good will who had done no harm to those who were shelling us, except, perhaps, for their noble wish to offer us their hand in an attempt to pacify the bloody Balkans. Our guests from Switzerland were talking about federalism, multi-ethnicity, tolerance, and economy: the essential points for their country's stability. Our side on the other hand talked about Serbian aggression, injustice; about the walls that were built up by others, and consequently by us too; about monsters who wanted national cages; and, of course, about Bosnians, Croats, and Serbs.

Somebody asked one of our guests: "*Well, what would be the keyword for constructing a country like Switzerland?*" He looked around confidently and then said decisively: "*Compromise*".

When you find yourself in the midst of futuristic horror at the end of the twentieth century, in the midst of a live TV broadcast of the Bosnian war, when you can be blown out of this world at any second here in Sarajevo, then the word "compromise" sounds so – unnatural.

Only today, after so many years of horror, personal loss and suffering, have I come to understand.

It was such a wise word, “compromise”. But back then we did not hear it; we did not want to hear it. Even nowadays the majority of people in Bosnia despise that word, and do not want to hear it. And yet, everything this word implies is good: to restrain yourself, and to be tolerant, because compromise is the essence of democracy. Be tolerant of others so they can be tolerant of you.

A document which dates from Austro-Hungarian times (1914) about the beautiful city of Mostar reads as follows:

Mostar lies on both sides of the Neretva River, in the gorge surrounded by the mountains Podvelež and Hum. The urban part of today's Mostar dates back to the fifteenth century. Its significant development began in 1522 when it became a temporary seat of the Herzegovina Sanjak-Bey (district administrator during the Ottoman Empire rule). As such, it developed into the political, economic and cultural centre of Herzegovina. The Stari Most (Old Bridge), constructed in 1566, was Mostar's most recognizable mark. During Austro-Hungarian rule Mostar was a county seat. Along with Tuzla, Banja Luka and Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mostar developed much faster than any other region during that period. Urban development was quite visible. In 1879 there were 1,909 houses and 10,848 residents; and in 1910 there were 2,769 houses and 16,392 residents (7,212 Muslims, 4,518 Orthodox Christians, 4,307 Catholics, 254 Jews and 87 Protestants). In 1914 the city already had county administrative offices, a county court, an attorney general's office, a district court, city administrative offices, a county hospital, a military hospital, a power station, a tobacco factory, a large classical high school and 4 other secondary schools, 2 general primary schools, a business school, a girls' high school, 5 Muslim high schools, 3 Muslim elementary schools, 30 mosques, a Catholic and an Orthodox church. A city power plant was constructed in 1911 by the Viennese company Öter-Siemens-Schucker-Werke, paid for by the municipality. The plant was powered by three 160-horsepower diesel engines. Nine sub-stations in the city supplied electricity for streetlights and for light bulbs in 3,000 homes. Before World War I there were 2 bridges in Mostar across the Neretva river (one was named after the Emperor Franz Josef – and the other after the city's mayor, Mujaga Komadina) and both were in use as of 1913. There were also a number of hotels in the city: the Neretva, the Bristol and the Orient. Close to 30 horse carriages were used as city transportation. In addition to a post office and telegraph, there was also a public telephone network with 72 subscribers in Mostar.

What might be the possible consequences of reading this text in Bosnia today, in the current political-nationalistic context?

An intolerant Bosnian Croat would say: I see information there that is not favourable to my nation today. An intolerant Bosnian Serb would say:

that information is beneficial to my nation, since nowadays in Mostar there are hardly any Serbs left out of 4,500. An intolerant Bosnian Muslim would say: what belonged to my people for a long time has been stolen from us. Those who today are counted as the ‘Others’ are going to be annoyed, and rightly so, because there are no ‘Others’ in Mostar today.

Who is right? Only those who – regardless to their nationality – do not make any distinctions between the peoples of Bosnia-Herzegovina based on the number of *ours* versus the number of *theirs*. Only those who do recognize in this text the beautiful and fragile multi-ethnic essence of Bosnia of those times, and especially of the present time. Only those who would know how to use the facts given in the text to the benefit of everyone here, in the act of enriching our coexistence.

Currently, all of us in Bosnia are at a big loss. We are unhappy, poor, discontented; the war brought no relief to anyone, but only frustration, which has been with us for such a long time now. In any case, we have to live together. Maybe in times to come, we shall even coexist in a harmony of our differences and diversities. We are so closely linked with each other that we simply do not have any other choice but to live together. We have already eliminated war as an option, thank God.

Imagining the Balkans (and Bosnia) is even worse than the Balkans itself, just as the deconstruction of the Balkan myth is more difficult than the Balkans' transitional period.

Nationalisms do not want the ‘Others’. It is easier to manipulate peoples than to teach them – with great difficulties and along with compromises too – how to think with their own heads. Perhaps, in some future time, we shall learn from Switzerland what is still beyond our reach today: how to act both to our own advantage and also for the good of others. ─

Translated from the Bosnian by Ines Tadić

Ferida Duraković (b. 1957) studied literature at Sarajevo University, graduating in 1980. Among other things, she has worked as an ice cream vendor, book seller, teacher, proofreader, cultural manager and translator. Between 1992 and 1995, during the war in Sarajevo, she lost many relatives and friends, as well as her entire library.



On the road between Podgorica and Sarajevo, *Barbara Galassi*



Buildings in Pristina, Srdjan Jovanović Weiss

From "Suburb" to "Region" Redefining the Balkans Within Europe

Andreas Ernst

Andreas Ernst examines stereotypes of the Balkans as the "Wild East" to the European Union's more sedate "West", and proposes a new view of the region: as a shared space of cultural experience |

The Balkans are the *banlieue* – the neglected suburbs – of Western Europe. Unfamiliar and a little uncanny, without the charm of the exotic. One does not go there unless one has to. This was already the case even before the collapse of the Yugoslavian federation and the wars that followed in the 1990s. But since then the media coverage of refugees, massacres and nationalistic mobs has shaped the way West Europeans see the Balkans. And as in all troubled suburbs, only violent conflict attracts the attention of the ‘city centre’. Thus, today the Balkans are a main focus of Swiss foreign policy, with the declared goal of minimizing migration from the region. A second goal, which Switzerland shares with the European Union, is the integration of the Balkan countries into the EU. In principle, this is a modernization project. The Balkan states, their societies and economies are to be reformed to the extent that they can satisfy “European standards” and be counted as full members of the European family. Incidentally, most people living in the Balkans see things in a similar fashion. In their eyes the EU stands for the promise of prosperity and individual security.

“Balkanism”. The Balkans as Europe’s raw, primitive and dark “Other”: for many years now the main critique of this view has come from Western social scientists of Balkan descent. Following Edward Said’s “Orientalism” theory, which maintains that Western notions of the Orient do not reflect the region itself as much as the desires and fears of the Western observer, the Serbian Milica Bakic-Hayden and later the Bulgarian Maria Todorova put forth a “Balkanism” theory. “Balkanism” is defined as a Western mechanism of exclusion, a derogatory discourse which situates the Balkan nations in a transitional zone of development: no longer Oriental but not yet European, adolescent, so to speak, disorderly, violent and hot-blooded. Especially during the Yugoslavian wars, as the media were peddling crude historical theories about the bloodthirsty nature of the Balkan peoples, Todorova’s arguments that the homogenization (i.e. ethnic cleansing) of nation-states and ethnic nationalism are not Balkan but Western European inventions, were very important. It is also easy to understand that during the (now already passé) “Balkan Art” trend, artists from the region protested against being presented as “Balkan” in exhibitions like *Blood and Honey* (Vienna, 2003) or *In the Gorges of the Balkans* (Kassel, 2003). And yet: the critique of Balkanism would be simplistic if it failed to recognize that the region has very specific social and cultural traits, which have had a lasting effect on its historical development and its relationship with the “rest” of Europe.

The Western Balkans. This is especially true of the so-called Western Balkans. The term is a for-

eign one, belongs to EU vocabulary and was coined in 1996. The Western Balkans comprise the former Yugoslavian countries, with the exception of Slovenia, and including Albania. In other words: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia – including the province of Kosovo, which is under UN administration – and Albania. With the invention of this label and the resulting regional concepts, the EU is pursuing two goals. On the one hand, these countries should be given “a European perspective” – in official parlance – and through reforms should be rendered fit to join the EU. On the other hand, the term defines a region whose countries are now obliged to work together, not least since regional cooperation is considered an important criterion for EU eligibility. In the region itself the term “Western Balkan” is not well-liked. Many fear that it conceals an attempt to revive the old idea of a “South Slavic League of Nations”. Others find the categorization discriminatory: after all, the region is an integral part of cultural Europe, including the Christian religion, a Europeanized Islam and a concept of nationhood stemming from German Romanticism. All of which is true. But there are good reasons for grouping these countries together. Certainly Bulgaria and Romania (and Greece, which as a longstanding EU member is no longer considered a Balkan country) share many of the Balkans’ development problems. But the countries of the Western Balkans have more unstable social structures and – with the exception of Albania – difficult inter-ethnic relationships. They are weak states in which strongly self-conscious ethnic groups chafe against one another.

Familial networks. There are historical reasons for this. Although the use of historical arguments for political purposes is an old and unfortunate custom in the Balkans, an attempt should be made to explain several structural characteristics of the Western Balkans in historical terms. When my neighbour in Belgrade feels that his electricity bill is too high, he does not dial the customer service hotline but calls his “Kum”. The *Kum* is his daughter’s godfather and works for the electric company. He has a brother (we would say cousin) in the accounting department. The *Kum* calls his brother and explains the problem to him, and the brother pulls the necessary strings, because my neighbour works in a bank and the accountant plans to buy a flat after he is married, for which he will need a loan. But this is not a purely economic barter system. The participants belong to a familial network where solidarity is practiced on an ongoing basis. In this sense friendship is not defined as individual affinity but as a practical partnership, which does not however preclude emotional closeness. Maintaining these networks is extremely time-consuming, sometimes entertaining, but

often demanding. The dissolution of the social state after the collapse of socialism served to strengthen these familial networks. People expect nothing from the state, its institutions and officials – or at any rate, nothing good. Unless, of course, one has “access” through the familial network. The absentee state and the resulting primary role of familial networks have a long history in the Western Balkans. Mistrust and distance from the authorities and later the state were rampant during the long Ottoman period, as the predominantly Christian Balkan peoples were connected to their rulers almost exclusively through the taxes they were required to pay. This did not significantly change after their liberation in the nineteenth century, because the young nation-states were ruled by a small elite which made its decisions at a great distance from the mainly rural population. The strongest bonds between the state and society existed during the Socialist period following the Second World War. Educational initiatives, the noticeable emancipation of women, industrialization and social welfare programmes weakened the familial networks and created a new relationship between the state and its citizens – but by no means a democratic one. Participation in political decision-making was very limited, if not nonexistent. But state services and ideological mobilization shortened the distance between those on top and those below. In the current phase of transformation that distance has increased again. After the hostilities had ceased, the warlords in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia had little to offer the people. Growing inequality, ostentatious war profiteers and corrupt politicians did not make it easy to identify with the state.

Public versus private. Over the past few years many things have improved, in all these countries. The economy is growing rather quickly, if on a low level. Political leaders are chosen according to democratic processes, and the media are free. The danger of violent inter-ethnic conflict seems to be at bay, with the exception of Kosovo – and perhaps Macedonia. Serbs are spending their vacations on the Croatian Adriatic coast once again, and Belgrade’s nightlife attracts many visitors from the neighbouring countries. And yet: there is still a sharp divide between a public sphere in which inconsiderateness, aggression or at the very least indifference dominate (from road traffic to the careless disposal of rubbish and fights in the queue at the post office) and a private sphere in which friends and guests are received with consideration, generosity and warmth. The political parties attach themselves to pre-existing familial networks and have established more modern clientelist structures. Allegiance is rewarded with the promise of patronage, should election victory

follow. One result of that is the ruthless political campaigning in which slander is accepted all around and rarely has legal consequences. The winner takes all: the candidate who can feed his supporters remains in power or becomes even more powerful. If an opposition politician neglects his party members, he risks losing influence altogether. Also, nationalism as collective ideology continues to dominate and is hardly weakened by increased security and well-being. In these “kinship societies” (Karl Kaser), the nation is more or less the extension of the family, and at weddings the white Serbian or black Albanian eagle flutters proudly at the head of the honking motorcade. Nation and state are not identical: citizens are also “the others” in multi-ethnic states like Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia or Macedonia. And some of “our people” live on the other side of the border, as a national minority in a neighbouring state. The underdeveloped concept of the citizen stands in contrast to an overdeveloped national consciousness which is sacralized through the nationally-structured churches. These factors lead, even today, to the typical stability risks of the Western Balkans.

Strategies for reform. The European Union is the most important agent of modernization in the Western Balkans. It pursues “member-state-building” with the incentive of full EU membership. The most important instrument in this process of modernization is the financial support which hinges on the fulfillment of certain conditions. In order to obtain access to these funds, it is necessary to set up administrative structures in such a way that they are capable of ‘absorbing’ them. The fundamental criteria: a functioning democratic system and the rule of law. Much of the progress which has occurred in the Balkans since the end of the wars may be ascribed to this “soft power” out of Brussels. The EU has a second instrument for modernization, which in some ways is reminiscent of Europe’s former superpower policy in the Balkans: the protectorates in Bosnia-Herzegovina (since 1995) and in Kosovo (since 1999). Here the EU, together with other international players, exercises direct executive rule. It remains a controversial question whether a sustainable modernization process may be achieved in this way. The results so far have not been promising. However, it must be taken into account that the preconditions in these deeply divided postwar societies are particularly difficult. Basically, however, the reforms aim at the same goal everywhere: these states are to become multi-ethnic communities governed by rule of law. The price to be paid is the weakening of nationally-based “kinship societies” which must evolve into “institutional societies” in which societal conflicts are resolved by due legal process rather than by famil-

ial networks. It seems logical that peaceful coexistence within this multi-ethnic mosaic is more likely within a European framework than within the limitations of a series of tiny states separated by visa barriers.

A regional quest for identity. But there is also a need for reform from within. Here for once the emphasis should not be placed on oft-cited civil society but rather on a new regional consciousness. The Western Balkan region must redefine its own identity. Instead of lamenting about hostile neighbours or the arrogance of the EU bureaucrats, the cultural elite should think about the shared characteristics of the region as a whole – beyond the “Ottoman yoke”, *cevapi* and a fondness for Eurovision songs in the Balkan style. Or perhaps it should pay more attention to those very things: because shared history, cuisine and a great musical tradition could be a good place to start. It is surely not a coincidence that in Slovenia, the country that was the first to break away from Yugoslavia (and was least affected by the war), there is very lively interest in contemporary music from the other former republics. The Balkan musical tradition offers the Slovenes more than their own folk heritage; the language barriers are easy to cross and there is a certain provocative thrill in fraternizing with one’s former enemies. The result is something like the re-establishment of a shared space of cultural experience. Surprising similarities and inspiring differences may be discovered, casually, “from below”. This process of a regional quest for identity will have to accept the fundamental idea of unity in diversity. Critics will try to dismiss it as “Yugonostalgia”. But let them be reassured: it is also the idea underlying European unity. —

Translated from the German by Marcy Goldberg

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Building site in Shkodra, between Tirana and Podgorica, Azra Aksamija



Reflection or Distortion?

The Cultural Transformation of Post-Communist Albania

Fatos Lubonja

Albania's Communist past makes it a unique test case for analyzing the relationship between economic restructuring and cultural change. As Fatos Lubonja shows, the country's current hybrid system also raises an unflattering mirror to the capitalist West |

Whenever the question is raised of the means by which a given reality may be transformed, two diametrically opposed theoretical approaches are invariably invoked: that of Marx, and that of Weber. While the former argued that it is the economic base which determines the superstructure, and that one must therefore transform the one in order to bring about a change in the other, the latter contended – in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* – that it is ideas which determine structural change.

Today we may conclude that we come closer to understanding the process whereby reality is transformed by considering the respective roles of both base and superstructure, since this dichotomy goes hand in hand with that of necessity and liberty – if one takes “liberty” to mean the creation of spaces in which the cultural and ideological tools needed to change reality may be developed. However, the question remains of how to recognize which sort of alchemy leads to success, and which to failure. At the same time, we must keep in mind that postmodern sensibility which does not construe the future as an arrival at a destination by way of a progressive utopia, but rather as the result of a multiplicity of movements, values and perspectives.

A test case. What, therefore, can we say about the transformations underway in former Communist countries like Albania? Among the states of the former East Bloc, Albania is one of the countries in which the gap is widest between the reality inherited from its Communist rulers and its new reality, which is aimed at fulfilling the Albanian goal of becoming part of Europe. Albania’s Stalinist regime, which lasted until 1991, had kept it isolated from the rest of the world, both Western and Eastern. Its current situation thus provides an intriguing test case for analyzing the degree to which social reality may be transformed by new ideas, and the extent to which such ideas are affected by structural changes, as well as by the gravitational pull of traditional culture. In addition, it reveals to what extent economic reforms may shape the creation of a new culture, in light of the results obtained to the present day.

The most serious cultural challenges faced in the effort to Europeanize Albanian society are threefold: the need to decontaminate it from the brainwashing ideology of a nationalist Communism by deconstructing its ideological myths; the need to stage a liberating catharsis, and thus to enshrine humanism, critical thought and universal human rights as central values; and the need to become familiar with the thinking, the discourse and the means of expression developed in the West during the period of Albania’s isolation. Ultimately these are the challenges posed by the transition from a totalitarian ideology with a monopoly on

the truth, to a culture of personal development and individual integrity through the dissemination of pluralist values, including the advances made by cultural minorities and the resurrection of the three traditional religions (Islam, Orthodox Christianity and Catholicism) banned by Communism.

Hybridization. Sixteen years down the line, the result can be described as a process of hybridization. The seeds of Western culture were not sown on fresh ground, but were instead simply grafted onto the existing stock. Western culture was embraced according to the old methods, and thus treated to an utterly uncritical mystification. The construction of capitalism began under the banner of neo-liberalism, which meant that only Western commercial culture was promoted. While it might be correct today to speak of a superficial de-Communization of Albanian society, there has been no catharsis, no rewriting of history freed from nationalist myth-making, and no introduction of a critical spirit – elements crucial for the birth of a new culture. This hybrid owes its creation essentially to the fact that political and cultural power in Albania has remained in the hands of the same elite responsible for its previous culture of nationalist Communism. The so-called democratic revolution did not overthrow the Communist elite, it merely recycled it.

Privatization. And yet it is difficult to say whether this failure is solely cultural or political: because, parallel to what I have called a process of cultural hybridization, there has also been a change in the country’s economic structure. When Albania opened itself to the free market, its economy was the world’s most bankrupt and least capable of facing competition, and thus the sale of labour power in the West, drug trafficking and prostitution became the most effective means of survival. The Albanians made their entrance onto the world stage with their mass exodus in the early 1990s. Within Albania, meanwhile, the triumph of the cult of neo-liberalism had inaugurated a process of privatization of all public property, and of laissez-faire capitalism accompanied by corruption and crime in which the political system, far from serving the public and safeguarding free competition, itself took on the aspect of an extremely lucrative business. After sixteen years of trying to create its own market economy, Albania is barely able to produce a fifth of what it consumes. The rest is provided by expatriate Albanians, by trafficking, and by foreign subsidies. Such an economic structure has a potent effect on politics, and on the superstructure in general. The might of unofficial economic players – in other words, criminals – from a minority whose wealth has skyrocketed is now so enormous that it is diffi-

cult to put in place a policy which has any hope of curtailing their income, of putting a stop to trafficking, of creating the conditions necessary for a more just distribution of assets, and of making it possible to invest in a worthier culture.

Media power. This dominant economic structure has created its own power apparatus, in which the media enjoy a privileged place. With fewer than three million inhabitants, Albania has some 80 national or local television channels and 33 daily newspapers, an unprecedented hypertrophy of the media industry and an utter distortion of the laws of the free market. These vehicles are financed principally by corruption and influence peddling; their owners, who are for the most part construction industry bosses or major retailers, control the bids on public works projects, the construction sites, and the markets, and ensure their own impunity from prosecution for tax evasion. For the first few years under the new system, the so-called Communist intelligentsia kept its head above water economically by working for the various NGOs used by the West to install civil society and to introduce new ideas, but gradually, as the unofficial, criminal economy took root and gained its hold on the state, most of its former members began to try to hire on with that economy, or to become active in a political system increasingly dependent upon it. A good many of the intellectuals who had been propped up until then by Western money, thanks to the modest sponsorship of western NGOs such as the Soros Foundation or Pro Helvetia, or who had qualified or completed studies abroad, were able to gain a foothold in this sort of industry, and thus to secure remuneration many times that of their less fortunate fellows. It took only a short time for this new sector to reduce the majority of the country's journalists and intellectuals to the status of its employees, paid to serve its interests, and to turn the media into a powerful tool for protecting its profits. The resulting culture is entirely con-

sumerist, with its reality TV, cookie-cutter stereotypes and "scratch'n'win" rewards.

Mirror or caricature? The system concocted in this manner is a hybrid which betrays glimpses of its roots in the former regime: where the media were cogs in the Communist brainwashing machine, maintained by politicians who also controlled the economy, all in the name of perpetuating the rule of the nomenklatura. Nowadays, the main instrument used to keep a hold on power is no longer the police or the secret service, but the media, which are busy broadcasting a new form of ideological brainwashing.

Of course, one could object that the concentration of political, media, and financial power in the hands of a few men is an old story, one familiar in the West as well. And perhaps it goes without saying that, even though the West has won the Cold War, it has a long way to go before it wins the war against organized crime in those same countries and can spread the best of its cultural values there. In point of fact, this is a war it must wage at home as well: the criticism is justified, in spite of the enormous differences. In a certain sense, during the hybridization process, Albania seems to have adopted the worst face of Western capitalism, becoming a mirror in which the West can view a caricature of its own most disgraceful features. And it is precisely for this reason that Albania's cultural challenges can only be regarded as an integral component of Europe's cultural challenges. ─

Translated from Arben Leskaj's French translation of the Albanian original by Rafaël Newman

Fatos Lubonja was born in Albania in 1951. He is a writer and journalist and the editor of the quarterly *Përpyjekja* ("Endeavour"). Between 1974 and 1991 he was a political prisoner, and since his release has been one of Albania's most outspoken human rights activists. He has published several books, and numerous articles and essays. He lives in Tirana and Florence.

Culture at the Crossroads

Avant-Garde and Institutional Art in Kosovo

Shkëlzen Maliqi

The leading Albanian art critic and political analyst Shkëlzen Maliqi summarizes the challenges faced by Kosovo's art scene, where the most dynamic and innovative work is happening outside of established institutions and funding structures |

The contemporary visual arts scene in Kosovo emerged and developed rapidly sometime around the middle 90s, only to reach its peak during 2003–2004, when a group of authors from Kosovo, most of them from younger generations, managed to enter the global art scene. Visits by renowned curators, and the participation of Kosovar artists in the explorative exhibitions of “Balkan Arts” – such as Harald Szeeman’s *Blood & Honey: Future’s in the Balkans*, Vienna 2003 and René Block’s *In the Gorges of the Balkans: A Journey*, Kassel 2003 – immediately put out some new names as the representatives of regional art. In fact, René Block returned to Kosovo and told the local newspaper *Java* that what he had discovered in Kosovo was “the avant-garde of Balkan contemporary arts”.

With the exception of Sisley Xhafa, who managed to succeed in the West by himself, the most renowned names from the new art scene are: Sokol Beqiri, Erzen Shkololli, Jakup Ferri, Lulzim Zeqiri, Albert Heta, Dren Maliqi, Fitore Isufi Koja, Merita Koci, Driton Hajredinaj, Alban Muja. These artists excel particularly in dozens of brilliant video art pieces. The Slovenian curator Nadja Zgonik has said that today’s Kosovar video art is among the best in Europe. Other people who play an important role in Kosovo’s art scene are Mehmet Behluli, an artist and professor, and the theorists and critics Sezgin Boynik and Vesa Sahatçiu. The activities of the Kosovar art scene have taken place mostly in the Exit Gallery in Peja and lately also in the Rizoma and Stacion spaces in Prishtina.



Street in Pristina, Kyong Park

Out of nowhere? Compared to other Eastern European countries, where underground contemporary art movements existed even during the long years of communist dictatorship, the new art in Kosovo looks like it emerged from nowhere. A similar kind of movement can be found in the Kurdish region of Turkey. Apart from being “lost provinces”, the artistic circles of Kosovo and Diyarbakir “surprisingly” produced a new wave of talents who used new media and expressed themselves in a modernist or even postmodern language.

The similarities between the Kosovar and Diyarbakir scenes in terms of aesthetics and substance became visible in a joint exhibition in Croatia, *M’vyn ndrim radikal – I need Radical Change* (Galeria Nova Zagreb, 2004) curated by the WHW group. The curators claimed that the artists from the two



“provinces” represented pure and original honesty. What they represented, in fact, was the East in general. Commenting on the description of the Kosovar scene as “avant-garde”, the Albanian curator Edi Muka cynically said that the Eastern artists are in fact “*new proletarians in the world of art*” who have no prospects compared to the mainstream of Western culture. In this context, the claims of “*discoveries*” in the art scene that were “*coming out of nowhere*” were bound to face criticism. Szeeman, Block and the others were accused of treating art from this region as an “*exotic product*” for the postcolonial cultural space and market.

Remaining sustainable. But now that Western critics and curators have pointed their spotlight somewhere else, Kosovar contemporary art, as well as

the art of the East in general, are faced with the genuine challenge of being in the desperate position of the proletarian: the challenge of remaining sustainable in the domestic scene without any help from the West.

During its peak, the Kosovar art scene received support from many global foundations. In the 90s, the scene was mainly assisted by the Soros Foundation. In the 2003–2006 period, the German Federal Cultural Foundation (*Kulturstiftung des Bundes*) made capital investments in the scene as part of its “Relations” project. Recently, Pro Helvetia has been more active as a supporter. As the ever-expanding art scene witnesses the emergence of new trends, lately even a return to painting (such as Vigan Nimani) as well as new names (for example, the video artist Nurhan Qehaja), it has

also started to suffocate because of lack of funds and the lack of existence of an art market.

Parallel scenes. Following the discrimination practiced by the Serbian regime, Kosovars had become used to the development of parallel lives and scenes which function without any outside interference. Having spent two decades opposing the Serbian regime and its imposed reality, the contemporary art scene in Kosovo did not care that much about the lack of support from Kosovar institutions, because those institutions had also been parallel to and outside of the system. After the war, and after the establishment of the international administration in Kosovo, the art scenes continued to coexist separately. One considered itself as being the 'official' art scene, because it once again was supported by institutions and had an academy, galleries and a 'tradition'. The other scene functions outside of the institutions, in improvised spaces, with informal schools, and through methods which seem subversive. The second scene is more creative, dynamic and managed to quickly penetrate into the big European exhibitions. The artists who belong to this scene are seen as being curious, courageous, reflective and critical towards the real problems of society and the place which art occupies within it.

On the other hand, the other art scene, which proclaims to be the follower of the finest Kosovar traditions, has not found an answer to the challenges of the time. This is true even for the best art produced by the modernist generation. An example of this is the late doyen of Kosovar painting, Muslim Mulliqi, whose work during the 90s, although highly expressive, became more and more introspective, gloomy and depressive.

Cultural policy and politics. The two scenes do not have any common nest or mediator. The truth is that the institutional art transferred itself into politics and ideology, as if to follow the famous saying: "At a time of war there is no place for art". It

was no coincidence that Ibrahim Rugova, a writer, would become a political leader and the first president of Kosovo after its liberation from Serbia and the installment of international administration. The non-institutional and subversive art scene, on the other hand, emerges as patriotic — in the sense that it radiates substantial artistic resistance towards repression. Although the extremist mouthpieces from the 'official' art scene never ceased their accusations against the new scene, even charging it with betraying tradition and "national values", the new art was the one which led the way in subversiveness against any occupation or threat to freedom. It did so while using the most contemporary means and a language which was understood well beyond Kosovo's borders.

But the defensiveness and dryness of the official art on the one hand, as well as the dynamism and creativity of the new art scene on the other, cannot continue to exist as two parallel realities. These two scenes face a decisive confrontation. The alternative scene seeks to legitimize its presence and influence. The most essential issue will be the possibility of access to the public funds which so far have been monopolized. The unresolved political status of Kosovo has so far served as an alibi to avoid internal confrontations. But this cannot be put off any longer. The contemporary art scene has benefited from the 'neocolonial' funds, even if those funds helped artists run away to the West. But those artists who wish to remain in Kosovo now know that what is more dangerous than neocolonialism is their colonization by the past: by its narrow-minded cultural policies and traditions. ─

Translated from the Albanian by Agon Maliqi

Shkëlzen Maliqi (b. 1947) is an Albanian philosopher, art critic and political analyst. He was a founder of the Social-Democratic Party of Kosovo, and has published many books and articles on Albanian art and politics.

Below on the Left

A Personal Geography

Sonia Zoran

The French-Swiss journalist Sonia Zoran discovered the Balkans first through her father's family, and later as a war correspondent. Today her view of South East Europe includes a look back at the West I

When I was little, I liked the word “Balkan” because it sounded like “balcony”. And I used to go out on the balcony almost every evening to watch the sun set over the Jura. I dreamed of going there, far away, to the other side of those mountains and maybe even the other side of the Atlantic. But I still liked people from the East, because it seemed to me they were better at playing ball.

Like my father.

My father could juggle three balls at a time, and at the swimming pool he played the seal like nobody else.

When my father came to Switzerland, with no intention of staying, he was a basketball player and a student. Years later, after I had been born, he was no longer a student but a deliveryman, warehouseman, juke-box repairman, and above all, a family man.

People said that my father came from an Eastern country, but he said that wasn't exactly true. That things were more complicated, that he was Yugoslavian, and also stateless. And I wondered what the Balkans, East and West, had to do with all that. It was so complicated, I carried it within me always. And when I dreamed of America, in the evening on my balcony in Lausanne, I thought about – or rather sensed – the other side, the denied continent which was behind me, like a shadow.

It's complicated, I know, but that's how it was inside my head. Especially because my mother had a very odd way of imagining geography, without latitudes or longitudes, but with directions that always took our house as the starting point. So to her the Jura was on the upper right, and Yugoslavia on the bottom left. Lake Geneva, where she had grown up, was of course the centre.

From time to time the family from the “bottom left” turned up. My aunt from Skopje would pinch my cheeks so hard it hurt. The uncles from Zagreb and Split played chess with my father and went sledding with us. I thought they were handsome, different, noisy, sombre and funny at the same time. Even if we did not see each other often, even if we shared far fewer memories than we did with the Swiss relatives on my mother's side of the family, this too was part of our world – our cousins, our cooking, with lots of onions and loud voices. Our games of Scrabble in four different languages, depending on what each of us was learning.

During these visits and vacations I more or less learned to speak Serbo-Croatian, that fickle language which has now been separated into Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian. I learned the difference between Stalinism and Titoism; I followed the family debates between those who considered themselves Croats or even Slovenes, and those who didn't care at all, depending on where they were born into that stationmaster's family in perpetual motion from the pepper fields and gypsies of Serbia to the shores of the Adriatic.

I forged my own ties with tears shed on train platforms, first loves, my interest in non-alignment and self-determination during my studies in political science. So when the war came it was as if my second, more fragile, house was burning down.

With a feeling of urgency and matter-of-factness I have often worked in the former Yugoslavia – with the passion and the fears of a young journalist, too. I thought it would be enough to observe carefully, to relate, to explain, in order to



Enver Hoxha's pyramid in Tirana as a public slide, *Ana Dzokic*



help put out the fire. I was asked by the living dead to bear witness, and I understood the limits of my profession, of so-called civilization and of words, while at the same time I discovered the abyss opening within me. I was torn not only between East and West, but between similar madnesses which regularly pit human beings against one another in the name of historical, but more often hysterical, claims.

On the “bottom left” I learned that I would never again be able to tolerate conflicts between ethnic groups in the name of claimed cultural or religious superiority. I learned that the search for identity should never be based on the notion of purity or the refusal of difference. I had known these things before, they had been taught to me already, but I did not completely feel them in my guts until I faced those monsters who justified the siege of Sarajevo with the age-old struggle against Islam, or those bigots of all stripes capable of referring to their god while standing in front of cannons, houses on fire or columns of refugees. I had already learned these things and I believed – as no doubt you do too – that they were obvious to everybody. But they weren’t anymore, not in the Balkans, at the end of the twentieth century. What I am learning nowadays from the Balkans and the people who live there – because I still go back often, to those neighbouring countries who are no longer complete enemies but not yet friends – is that today these things are no longer obvious to us in the West either. Here, on the upper right.

It is here that people talk of the “clash of civilizations”, here that certain immigrants are classified as “impossible to integrate”. It is here that we find the fear of other people and places, where the poor are seen as intruders.

While working on a documentary film project last fall, I met Biljana Djurdjevic in Belgrade: a wonderful painter whose brush is as precise as it is pointed. This young woman, who lived in Baghdad before the American attacks on Iraq under Bush senior, simply observed – standing in front of her canvases of abused children, of elderly people evacuated in shopping carts – that nationalism has left Belgrade but not the region, and that it is on the rise elsewhere in the world. Lako Nikolic, a young actor who does the dubbed voice of Donald Duck and speaks nearly perfect French thanks to the “Assimil” method, told me he was worried about France and its future if new ways of thinking about the nation and of promoting national cohesion were not introduced. Like those Kosovans who, willingly or unwillingly, have returned from Switzerland and Germany and who try to recreate the Western dream in Pristina with colourful petrol stations and immaculate hotels,

these artists see very clearly where they are, in their no-man’s-land on the margins, and where we are, in our so-called centre of the world.

And, just like at the start of the war, I would like to say that we are making a mistake. The “Yugos” that we regularly refuse to “naturalize” are being used as ammunition for populism, although they themselves have already had their deadly fill of nationalism and we are the ones today who are latching onto an ideal of “Swissness” as a national bunker in times of peace. A bunker embedded within a Fortress Europe closed to the migrants and activists of the South.

And today, on my balcony, that’s the direction in which I look: because between the East and the West there is the South. ─

Translated from the French by Marcy Goldberg

Sonia Zoran was born in 1965 in Vevey and grew up in Lausanne, where she studied political science. She was a founder of the newspaper *Le Nouveau Quotidien* and for many years reported frequently from the former Yugoslavia. She is currently the producer and host of a weekly programme on French-Swiss public radio RSR1.

This Free and Corrupt Country Ukrainian Contradictions

Yuri Andrukhovych

Elections, intrigues, Orange Revolution and Blue revenge: Ukraine's recent history has been dominated by internal conflict and contradiction. A situation that cries out for provocative interventions by artists and intellectuals, says

Yuri Andrukhovych – taking a step in that direction himself I

The Hungarian novelist Sándor Márai, in his fascinating memoir of the post-World War II years, very aptly compares the transformation of a country's socio-political system to a highly complicated sex change operation. The operation is supposed to turn a man into a woman, or a woman into a man. But most of the time the result is a hybrid: a hermaphrodite.

On the other hand... The Ukraine today shows many signs of socio-political hermaphroditism. Here are just a few examples. On the one hand, the country supposedly enjoys freedom of the press and, even more, the freedom to be critical, but on the other hand, the courts and legal institutions are totally corrupt, which means that citizens have practically no means of defending their interests through judicial channels. On the one hand, the private sector is developing, especially in the area of small and mid-size businesses, but on the other hand, the omnipresent oligarchic clans dictate the rules of the economic game and could at any time destroy these small and mid-size businesses if they so desired. On the one hand, the role and influence of NGOs is growing, including those which defend human and civil rights; on the other hand, contract killings, torture and especially wiretapping are standard procedure for the law enforcement agencies. On the one hand, we have the perfectly modern and pro-European rhetoric of all the leading political camps; on the other hand, their overwhelming tendency toward

“significantly more effective” authoritarian Russian models, secret diplomacy and constant reciprocal betrayal. On the one hand, there is the growth of an active cultural scene focused on innovative contemporary tendencies; on the other hand, a media landscape dominated by Russian mass culture. For every “one hand” there is at least one “other hand”. To say that our country is full of contradictions is a euphemism. In reality it is not just full of them, it is made up of contradictions. A living example of the hermaphroditic process of socio-political change which Sándor Márai described so bitterly and accurately sixty years ago.

A giant work of art. The Orange Revolution, which I've already vowed three times over the past twelve months to stop mentioning – an oath I'm now breaking for the third time – was both the realization of a hope and a consolidated effort to overcome 'hermaphroditism' and return to normalcy. That is why the participation of artists and intellectuals was so important. What happened did not emerge out of nowhere, but had been brewing for a few years, since 2001, when the first protests took place in Kiev against the hermaphroditic regime of the then-president, against his increasingly obvious wish to restore the former, totalitarian 'gender'. From then on, intellectual and artistic circles became increasingly politicized. In 2004 this process culminated in a sweeping historical momentum which mobilized almost every one of us. It was simply impossible to stand

aside. As a result, the Orange Revolution and its epicentre, Independence Square in Kiev, were transformed into a giant work of art, and the labels used to describe the Revolution were derived from cultural discourse. It was called “postmodern”, “carnavalesque”, the “revolution of songs” and of course, after the good old Central European tradition, a “velvet” revolution.

Failure. Why, then, was this strange and unquestionably wonderful event, the most important in contemporary Ukrainian history, followed by utter disappointment?

First of all, because of the childish naiveté of its participants – the “citizens of the Maidan [the Square]”, the best and most active segment of society – who failed to understand that the opposition’s electoral victory (in the so-called third round) was not the end, but only the beginning. When the tents were taken down, a self-induced process of elimination of the “Maidan” from active politics began: pack your bags and go home. And the “new leadership” remained alone, endowed with an unheard-of trust which would prove to be unfounded, and with the thankless task of successfully completing the transformation of society. Secondly, because of the cobbled-together and once again ‘hermaphroditic’ character of that “new leadership”, which led to chronic disputes (all the way to open enmity) within the ranks. In-fighting and reciprocal attempts to discredit each other, magnified through unfettered coverage in the newly-free media, massively aided the “old guard” in winning back votes during the parliamentary elections of March 2006. Attempts to fight their way to the top through intrigue started a chain reaction: scandals, resignations, crises, and ultimately cynical betrayal and the formation of a completely different parliamentary coalition which did not reflect the will of the voters.

Third (but not last), because of the lack of a cultural revolution, which should have been an integral part of the revolution itself. As it turned out, the “new leadership” took its cue from the old cultural stereotypes and maintained the old cultural hierarchies. In spite of the supposedly complete freedom of the press, there was no media revolution. No fundamentally new project for an independent newspaper or magazine (for instance, such as the Polish *Gazeta Wyborcza*), no innovative new programmes on the radio, but almost exclusively the same formats, pop and idiotic DJ babblings – and the clearly botched attempt to create a public television broadcaster.

A bittersweet opportunity. The result of these and a thousand other causes was the “creeping coup” in July and August 2006, during which the old guard returned to their only recently vacated offices and eagerly began the task of restoring the former re-

gime to suit their own tastes – with the unity and organization of a Mafia clan held together by familial ties.

When we talk about what is happening in our country and where we stand today, it must not be forgotten that history has not yet come to an end and the situation may be followed by any number of imaginable scenarios.

In the spring of 2007 the “Blue Revenge” went so far that once again the scent of “to be or not to be” hung in the air. As the saying goes, “appetite comes with eating”. Increasingly consolidated pressure from the ruling counter-revolutionary coalition onto the president – the last, almost purely symbolic bulwark of the ‘new order’ – and the increasingly obvious craving for total power ultimately woke Yushchenko from the slumber he had been in since his inauguration and induced him to exercise his right to take action. He began by dissolving Parliament and calling new elections for September 2007. [At the time this article was completed, the election results had not yet been announced – Ed.]

One side or the other (broadly speaking: the “Orange” or the “Blue”) will win by a very small margin. But at the same time, the elections are a giant step forward, because they will teach the Ukrainian politicians that betrayal has its consequences: there is reason to hope that those who distinguished themselves most excessively in that department will not be re-elected to Parliament.

Basically, times are good. If it were up to me, I would call for new elections in Ukraine every two months. By forcing politicians to face up during elections to their recently made promises, our society will become increasingly independent and regain the initiative. Elections do not allow the political swamp to stagnate and the voters to give up in despair and resign themselves to “stability and order”.

As far as the artists are concerned, this is a golden age for dramatic ruptures, intellectual and artistic provocation; a further bittersweet opportunity to rethink themselves and their country – a country which, before our eyes, day by day, is gradually defining itself, fleshing out, and in spite of all obstacles slowly beginning to transform the blurred traits of its delayed birth into the first clear characteristics of a new self. ─

Translated from Sabine Stöhr’s German translation of the Ukrainian original by Marcy Goldberg

Yuri Andrukhovych was born in 1960 in the town of Ivano-Frankivsk (also known as Stanislav), Ukraine and is considered the leading contemporary Ukrainian writer. To date he has published five collections of poetry, four novels, a book of short stories and two collections of essays, as well as many literary translations. He is the recipient of numerous awards, and his works have been translated and published in English, German, Polish, Russian and Hungarian.



On the outskirts of Tirana, Katherine Carl



Before and After

From Belgrade to London, and Back Again

Vladislav Bajac

In the spring of 2000 Vladislav Bajac attended a writers' conference in London. The recent war had caused irreparable changes, but the return trip from Belgrade to London marked another kind of turning point in the author's life I

No matter how I look at it, my life is dramatically divided into the one I lived before the bombing of Belgrade and the one I lived after it. I figured this out a few months after the war had ended.

Just as it is sometimes necessary for days, or even years, to pass for a certain feeling to crystallize, so it is that time is needed to define that feeling clearly. On June 10, 1999, when the bombs stopped raining down from the sky, it was enough to have the feeling that something bad was behind us. It is most likely that this was a kind of catharsis after ten years of wars, disintegration and destruction, not only of the country but also of our humanity as individuals. That delicate uniqueness of each person, and the inalienable right to it, had finally been crushed. Even though the political course of events somewhere in the background logically hinted at the inevitability of change and of the likelihood of better days ahead, it was hard to accept it with an open heart: everything had become so soiled, it was not easy to believe that it would ever be clean again.

The diagnosis of my behaviour: I was quiet, withdrawn, melancholic, outwardly at peace. However, I did not burden anyone with the causes of the sadness which, obviously, had entered my life never to leave it again. But the adaptation therapy began to work. I started writing a new, rather 'dry' novel and I was satisfied to be writing again, even if my emotions were subdued. It was good to be honest and to respect my own abilities at the time. I did not dare to demand much more from myself in those days.

An invitation. And then, somehow, unexpectedly, came an offer for my 'real' (return) trip into the world. Under normal circumstances, I might have called it a challenge: an invitation from the British Council to go to London. Reasons for accepting invitations can always be found. The only one I was conscious of at the time was semi-private: just as

I had been educated on the Hellenic European tradition that was so close to me, I had also – by my own choice – grown up on the British roots of international rock and roll. The second reason I understood only later: the time had come for a quiet, gradual and careful making of peace with the world (I will never be at peace with myself again) through the mutual explanation of certain things that might at least clarify, if not heal, the hurt. Perhaps I also thought that it was actually English culture, in which I had faith and which I thought I understood well enough, that I could 'confide in' a little, and that it would then understand me as well.

When the proposals for the topics arrived for the conversation between the guests – writers from (in alphabetical order) Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia – and from the hosts of the event, Great Britain, it was clear to me that the British Council was placing itself in the role, for the first time publicly, of the peacemaker between countries so recently in conflict. The hosts, I concluded upon arrival, could hardly wait to use the bombing of Yugoslavia to "make all the victims equal", and to use the equality of that suffering and its consequences to launch a renewal of official communication in public. Maybe they were right. However, this conviction did not free them from the obvious fear that their guests might even go after each other at the round table.

Neutral ground. It was indeed the goodwill and motivation of our hosts for the organization of the all-too-fitting and inspirational topic "Writers, Readers and Countries", with a little help from the guests, that managed to overcome the fear of a possible fiasco.

Where in "connecting Southeast Europe with Great Britain through books and writing" (a quote from the London papers) was I? The press, exaggerating,

called this event “*an exceptional and unique moment*” in which the guests would find themselves on “*neutral ground*” to talk about their work, and share their experiences on the topic of the relationship between writers and societies. It was as if I alone had been delegated to attend negotiations about the future of literature. The ‘official’ meetings included conversations, public readings and panel discussions. Of course, the public did not know about the entire (remarkable) mechanism of the organizers which was set in motion before we ever appeared in public: that mechanism was used to gradually and carefully bring us closer together. At the end (of the preparations) each of us would indeed have something to say on the topics “The Writer’s Responsibility to the State”, “The Writer’s Responsibility to the Reader”, “Integrity and Privacy in Literature”, and on the topics of translating and teaching literature.

My faux pas. Although I had visited London relatively often, my visits to that city during the sanctions and wars (as indeed to any other city of a foreign country) gave me a distorted picture of everything I had seen or experienced there. So, this time as well, for some inexplicable reason, I made my first (and to be honest my only) *faux pas* sitting in the smooth leather back seat of the Mercedes taking me from the airport through the city to my hotel. The chauffeur was professionally silent, and the hostess accompanying me on the trip from airplane to comfortable hotel kept up the conversation required by protocol. I politely answered her carefully measured questions, and at one point I felt the need to respond with a compliment of some sort. I came up with the following statement-of-fact in surprise: “*Oh, how quiet London is!*”

What a load of nonsense! I realized it even before I finished the sentence, but it was too late. We were driving through the bustling center of town,

full of traffic, and one could say anything except that we were in peaceful surroundings. But I had forgotten that we were speeding along in the very latest luxury automobile whose engine cannot be heard whether it is running or not, and whose every part functioned as it should. My hostess did not even reply with a deservedly ironic answer, unless there was sarcasm to be found in her light reply: “*The windows are up.*”

This very simple, precise, and logical answer hit me harder than any ironic comeback would have. Of course, my hostess did not dare to be rude, but the truth was that she, most fortunately, had not paid the slightest attention to my foolish remark. She was so experienced that she coolly, moderately and without philosophizing absorbed all the sentences that functioned only to pass the time between point A and point B. Her professionalism saved face – mine! This event (known, until now, only to me) was a sign of my passing from one world into another. It was a sort of tollbooth. Once I had paid, I could continue my journey in peace.

Crises. The world I stepped into lived its life as nervously as its consumer indulgence dictated. If one wanted to have something, it must be paid for, with the uncertainty that lurked in the shadows of even those whose social standing seemed to be quite safe and sound. A portion of that stress brought out the need for people to compete (more with themselves than with others) and this, on the other hand, raised their existential anxiety to an even higher level. And so on in a vicious circle: from insecurity to security and back again, with the ever-present consciousness of the transience of it all. This modern voodoo dance, which grew into a trance, seemed to make people look busier, more disciplined, more obedient, or simply: better. At the same time, it wore them down with its breakneck speed, which at times was the cause



The "Western Gate" on the highway to New Belgrade, *Artingeering*



of real psychological dramas. I was there to witness some of those traumatic crises and thus I know that I would not wish them on anyone, not even that small number of people whom, to put it politely, I am not fond of. That breakdown of the soul was just as tragic as the physical pain of the wars recorded by the international TV networks from 'primitive' places in the world, far from the West. And from my Balkans as well.

In any case, no matter to what extent I was (or wanted to be) critical of our organizers, I actually had nothing to complain about. From their perspective they understood the Balkans in a way I had known about for a long time. To try to change their opinion at that moment was pointless. But it was worthwhile to try to explain the events, clarify the details, offer a picture from the inside, to add colour to the surface. And thus to present: oneself. This is "Ruritania" – through Southeast Europe, the Western Mediterranean, the Central and South trans-Danube – melded into "the Western Balkans", no less.

The writer and the world. That spring, the year 2000, Serbia and Montenegro were shaken by a war between criminal gangs who dominated the media, even when they were presented (in words and pictures) to the public as corpses. As I stood in front of an audience that was certain I had quite seriously prepared to confront them with the truth on the topic, I remembered that in my briefcase I had, as a random sample, two magazines that I had bought at the Belgrade airport to read on the flight to London: one a Belgrade weekly and one a bi-weekly from Novi Sad. On both cover pages, in colour, was the same criminal (although it could easily have been two different ones), killed in a recent showdown. On the cover of the weekly there was a proud picture of him still alive, and on the cover of the bi-weekly he (or someone else, it did not matter) was lying in the street, cut down by the bullets of his colleagues. That is how I began the introduction to my presentation: "*This is reality in today's Serbia!*" I showed them the pictures, raising the magazines in the air, and in order to offer some relief to the horrified public, I went on, "*But, you see here at the bottom of*

the page there is a line of words? Just imagine: it says there is an interview with me inside! Isn't this an encouraging coincidence? Writers are still on the front page."

The ice was broken. I proceeded to hold one of the most effective lectures of my life, improvising from beginning to end. This is not simply boasting on my part, but was confirmed for me by the organizers and the audience. My success may not have been due to any kind of inspiration, but simply came, because the story was being written by the steady hand of real-life absurdity, which seemed to be more fantastic than what any writer could imagine. With a little charm and the talent to talk about terrible things with a note of irony, with wit and confidence, from the standpoint of one who believes in the reign of the spirit.

This was the place where Balkan audacity and British diffidence came into contact.

And speaking of the world: I shall never forget that my trip to London was actually the dress rehearsal for my long journey through Europe with about a hundred other writers from the Old Continent, which would begin a little more than a month later and last for six weeks. That "Literary Train Europe 2000" was supposed to become the temporal boundary between my old life and my new one. (If I had only known then what kind of an illusion that was!)

Anyway, could the British have ever had such a great empire if they were not good at organizing? Later, those very same organizers let me know that I had also passed the test. Others knew about it before my airplane touched the tarmac in Belgrade.

I was back in the world.

Translated from the Serbian by Randall Major

Vladislav Bajac was born in Belgrade in 1954. He studied literature and has worked as a journalist and translator. He has published five novels, two short story collections and two volumes of poetry, and is currently the director of a publishing house in Belgrade.

Building Bridges

An Integration Expert in Switzerland

Dejan Mikić

In Switzerland today, much attention has been focused on the challenges of integrating immigrants, including those from the former Yugoslavia. Born in Belgrade and raised in Schwyz, Dejan Mikić is ideally placed to help bridge the cultural divide |

In 1967, about a year after my father had arrived in Schwyz to take up a position as a doctor at the local hospital, my mother, my younger sister and I arrived in central Switzerland from Belgrade. Until the early 1990s I felt at ease here. The surrounding countryside, in particular the hinterland of Canton Lucerne where we moved four and a half years after our arrival, had long become home to me.

In 1991, the outbreak of war in what was then known as Yugoslavia unexpectedly changed my relationship to Switzerland – for the worse. The politics of the Serbian government, but implicitly also the Serbian diaspora in Western Europe, drew the media spotlight toward the troubles. Even the locals in my village pub had something to say on the matter, most of it unfavourable. Almost overnight my Serbian heritage, which had barely been mentioned in the previous two decades, became a topic for discussion in both my professional and my personal life. People I had known for years suddenly became distant or cold toward me. It seemed as though I was being held personally responsible for the atrocities that were being committed in the Balkans and blamed on Serbia.

This was a new and at times painful experience, but one which forced me to take a closer look at my roots. At the time I was still dreaming of carrying out further research in Africa as part of my ethnology studies, but the changing political situation was redirecting my attention toward South East Europe and the country of my birth. Around this time I met my future wife, who also came

from Belgrade, and took a job with Zurich City Council, and later with Caritas Zurich, as a counsellor for immigrants from the former Yugoslavia. My interest was now firmly focused on people from “Yugoslavia” who had come to Switzerland.

Today men and women from the former Yugoslavia have a bad reputation in Switzerland. “Yugo” has become an insult, and those with a name ending in “ic” or who are obviously from South East Europe face tough times at school, looking for housing or on the job market.

There is a stereotype of the “typical Yugoslavian”: male, inconsiderate, uneducated, a dangerous driver and a criminal (or at least with violent tendencies) and, above all, not integrated. This image has been forged by a mixture of genuine incidents and unrelenting media coverage. Recently the media have begun to differentiate more between ethnic groups and nationalities, but for most Swiss the word “Yugo” has come to cover all. And the “female Yugo”? Old-fashioned, unliberated and oppressed. Often even perceived as a mail-order bride.

For many years the public image of “Yugoslavians” was very different. From the 1960s, when the job-seekers’ migration began, to the late 1980s, citizens of ex-Yugoslavia were valued and sought-after employees. Their integration occurred without any obvious problems; “Yugoslavian” foreign workers attracted little attention, and certainly did not disturb.

Since the early 1990s however, the former “model foreigners” have become the most unpopular eth-

nic group in Switzerland. This change in image can be attributed to various factors: rising numbers; disproportionately high percentages of criminals, unemployed, welfare cases and invalids; refugees and asylum seekers; criminal tourists; the new stereotypes resulting from the war of the mid 1990s. In particular, young people from the Balkan region have become synonymous with trouble in school, violent tendencies and an apparent inability to integrate.

The local media and public debates create the impression that the gap between 'true' Swiss and people from the former Yugoslav republics is unbridgeable, that the cultural differences are simply too great. Insecurities, misunderstandings and confusion seem to be on the rise. Instead of growing closer together over the years – in spite of the many families that have lived here for three or even four generations – it seems that the gulf between the Swiss and those of Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, Bosnian, Kosovan, Macedonian or Montenegrin descent is continuing to grow.

A picture has been painted in the heads of the "natives", sharpened by the media and transmitted through political discussion, governmental reports and scientific publications. This image is of the foreign "other" or intruder threatening to undermine the local way of life and standard of living. Even the more moderate reports insinuate that the "foreigner" stands in direct opposition to the rest of society.

Despite the frequent media coverage and the fact that summer holidays in Slovenia, Croatia or Montenegro are "in" again, it seems that most Swiss know as little today about the former Yugoslav republics as they did 15 or 20 years ago. During training courses for prospective teachers, social workers and other related professionals, I sometimes ask participants what words they would associate with Serbia or Serbs. Most people have little or nothing to say, while words like "Islam", "mosque" or "headscarf" crop up disproportionately often.

Through my writing and publishing activities, I have made it my mission to counterbalance the prejudices and the one-sided, detrimental images attached to people from ex-Yugoslavia in Switzerland. My aim is also to give a face and a voice, not only to Serbs, but to all immigrants from the former Yugoslav republics. I want to show the variety and complexities of this ethnic group and battle against the sweeping generalizations often made. I want the reader to get to know individuals who, in their own ways, challenge, enrich, confirm or dispel the current image of "Yugoslavia". At the same time I hope that my writings will serve as an appeal for tolerance, respect and a new openness toward all ethnic groups living in this country.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my work so far has been the amount of positive feedback that I have received from immigrants and Swiss nationals alike. In the course of working on the two books I edited together with Erika Sommer, I came to realize how much goodwill our projects attracted, even from people who had no obvious connection to the Balkan region. As for the people I met with roots in ex-Yugoslavia, what became apparent was how open, uncomplicated and helpful they were – even a little proud of our publications. All of these things proved to me that I was on the right path and that in my own way I could help to build bridges across this ethnic divide.

Thinking back to my childhood in Central Switzerland, I honestly have to say that the acceptance my immigrant family experienced in this country could hardly have been better. I hope that my articles and books can help make it possible for children growing up in Switzerland today, wherever they may come from, to look back and say the same thing some day. ─

Translated from the German by Andrew Rushton

Dejan Mikić was born in Belgrade in 1961 and moved to Switzerland in 1967. He studied ethnology, history and psychology at the University of Zurich and participated in research projects in East Africa. He has worked as a counsellor on integration projects for the City of Zurich, and has been a social counsellor for Caritas Zurich since 1995. He has published various articles on immigration and co-edited the books *Als Serbe warst du plötzlich nichts mehr wert. Serben und Serbinnen in der Schweiz (As a Serb you weren't worth a thing: Stories of Serbs in Switzerland, Orell Füssli, 2003)* and *Jugoslawien – Schweiz einfach. 20 Erfolgsgeschichten (Yugoslavia – Switzerland, one-way. 20 Success Stories, Orell Füssli, 2007)*.



Shoe market in northern Albania, *Barbara Galassi*



It Seemed To Me As If... Variations On A Balkan Theme

Boris Previsic

There are Western stereotypes of the Balkans, and then there are the mutual stereotypes the Balkan nations hold about each other. The musician Boris Previsic transforms the theme of nationalism into an ironic refrain |

It seemed to me that even Metternich had once declared that the Balkans begin in Vienna, right behind the Rennweg. It seemed to me as if my musicians, on crossing the border from Macedonia to Albania, basically felt that we had ended up in Karl May's *"Land of the Skipetars"*, in the very last outpost of civilization – as if we hadn't already been sufficiently impressed and amused by the shepherd at the roadside in southern Serbia or the "No Weapons" sign above the entrance to the Olympic Studio in Sarajevo. Forget civilization – it seemed to me that this was not the issue here. What counts is where the lines are drawn: Eastern Europe versus Western or Central Europe, South-eastern Europe versus Northwestern Europe, the Balkans versus the rest of the world. In short: branded as negative, of course.

It seemed to me that there was method in exclusion, though only for purposes of rationalization and economic egotism: Catholic-Habsburgian-Central European Croatia against Orthodox-Byzantine-Eastern European Serbia against Islamic-Ottoman Bosnia against the ex-Yugoslavian poorhouse of Kosovo against an isolated and even more impoverished Albania. The technical term for this mutual stereotyping is "nesting orientalism".

It seemed to me that they were still trying to explain it away as a typically cultural phenomenon, as though the occupiers of Sarajevo in 1992 had indeed set about burning down the national library first thing – followed by the mosques, churches and anti-fascist memorials – as if it were unthinkable to tour the so-called Western Balkans with a (female) Moldavian pianist, as if that were what finally brought home to me where the Balkans

actually lie: *"Welcome to Molvania – A Land Untouched by Modern Dentistry"*.

It seemed to me as though there were only two generations in this cultural (and literal) minefield: one prewar, the other postwar; as though, depending on where we were, our audience consisted only of either the former or the latter – but rarely both in harmony. In Sarajevo and Pristina, frenzied youth would crowd into the venues, eager not to miss anything – there was not the slightest hint of those jaded audiences back home. (Home? Where? In the West? Anywhere except the Balkans? And possibly, thanks to the implied exclusion, right back in the Balkans once again?) New music is new – not the slightest hint of an oxymoron, but rather a compelling pleonasm. It seemed to me as if, precisely in those areas where the war had raged most fiercely, the young people were the most enthusiastic.

But then again, it seemed to me as if the only alternatives were noncommittal Western fare and the typical self-indulgence of Seldwyla: our native music will do, thank you. It seemed to me as if we had just played the best piece of music from the nineties in Sarajevo – with all the reticence of respect. The audience had got the message, it seemed to me, and had thanked us for being faithful to the music. Two days later – by which time, it seemed to me, we were playing with compelling verve and precision – at the most prestigious festival in the Balkans, if one can so much as mention the Balkans at the Zagreb Biennial: teachers of composition barely stifling their yawns as they bewailed the lack of melody and counterpoint, and international observers waffling on

about lack of form, as if those three fetters were the only ones music might be permitted to break for the sake of something more innovative. In coming to Zagreb, had we already arrived in the West? That's how it seemed to me.

There's no exclusion or inclusion without personal involvement in this supposedly cultural topography – often explained away in retrospect in anthropological terms, even though what we are dealing with, at most, are the dissimultaneities of history. But honestly: what would the Balkans be today without the nationalist rhetoric and war-mongering of the nineties in the name of newly imposed (Id)entities that are now, all of a sudden, supposed to be regarded in cultural terms? Maybe just a second Iberian peninsula at the other end of our rump continent — with no ambitions, just functioning as a blank screen for Europe's projections. Not a dream, in any case – not even a bad one that should be banished. —

Translated from the German by Catherine Schelbert and Ishbel Flett

Boris Previsic is a musician specializing in the flute, who holds education, orchestra and concert diplomas and a Ph.D. in German studies. In addition to his musical cooperation projects, he has been working on a Swiss National Science Foundation post-doctoral project since 2006: "The Balkans as a Reflection of European Identity."

Musical cooperation projects between the countries of ex-Yugoslavia and Switzerland

The associations *pre-art* and *Sonemus*, founded by Boris Previsic in 2001, promote the planning, financing, organization and implementation of musical cooperation projects especially in the field of new music, between the countries of ex-Yugoslavia and Switzerland. Festivals, productions and competitions for young composers encourage an innovative musical idiom and supra-regional cooperation. The resulting synergetic effects (training and contact among competent musicians, tours and a shared organization by and throughout the Balkans) help to offset the isolation of the newly established republics. Pro Helvetia has funded up to half of the cost of these projects.

For further information, see www.pre-art.ch or www.sonemus.ba (forthcoming).

Drawing Landscapes

Reflections on Macedonia

Iskra Geshoska

The multi-ethnic state of Macedonia faces particular challenges, on political as well as cultural levels. In the search for a viable identity, Macedonians could look more toward Western Europe, writes Iskra Geshoska – but the country must also learn to paint its landscape with colours of its own choosing |

One thing is certain: we are chaste. In the world of political, economic, intellectual, emotional and artistic promiscuity we are chaste, yearnings unsatisfied. This very diagnosis places us within the vortex of constant justification, fools us with the lure of amnesty, gives sense to our disorientation and irresponsibility.

State, heritage, country do not exist for themselves and of themselves. The collective story is composed of the fractals of individual little stories. Having this in mind, it seems to me that Macedonia, particularly for the past few years, has become a country of exceptional semantic complexity, searching for its reference points in the systems characteristic of developed democracies, while

doggedly practicing its petrified mentality of discrepancy and division. It's a thrilling but also exhausting journey. We – culture, country, nation – are mobilized into a multitude of discourses that vary depending on their different uses.

Our history indicates that the State represents a symbolic practice, not just a social heritage. Those of us living in Macedonia have been well aware of that over the centuries, being in a sense virtual, constructed out of artifacts, facts, but also out of phantasmagoric historical notions. This is exactly what has kept us in a state of constant tension and has reminded us that the State is not, fortunately, the pinnacle of the creation of the human spirit. This is a matter of constant tension and struggle.

Sketch of a meta-landscape. I often ask myself what is a greater curse: to have for a home a country which is in a period of transition for sixteen years, or to be homeless, a nomadic identity which transposes, views itself already in the after-shocks of the already-traditional European democracies? The key question for me is how to live, act, create in your own not-so-rosy cultural, political and theoretical context. How, in an environment of an all-encompassing sclerosis, against the amnesia of transitional society, to establish and practice “anarchic responsibility” toward what we choose as our own identity.

I think that this country, in the past 15 to 16 years, has lacked the strength to paint its landscape with quality colors, especially the one referring to culture and cultural policy as a key segment of social transition. The renaissance recipe for the use of fresh egg yolk as a guarantee for the permanence of color is obviously not working. It would seem that all these years someone has been painting using rotten eggs. That someone is us.

Some facts or... One encouraging fact all these years is that we managed to escape the “great conflict” in an exceptionally turbulent and militant region. With the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Macedonia was the only country that escaped the bloody disarming. Although the dream of functioning and efficient unity fell apart, the state did not fall, nor was it fractured the way it happened to Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia. Is that a question of mentality? Or a well-articulated political agenda? Or, most likely, a combination of both? Our mentality is one of acceptance, seclusion and adaptability, of some kind of obedience. As such it can have its good and its damaging aspects. Good in the sense that we can easily adapt from one communicatory code to another; damaging because it points to the lack of

integrity, determination and a clear affirmation when addressing our collective interests.

Nevertheless, escaping the armed conflict provided us with a certain advantage in the development of the democratic processes. That was especially important, considering that Macedonia’s tradition of multicultural social structure spanning over centuries could predispose the country as a ‘powder keg’. In that context, every country and every history is full of contradictions. Ours is not an exception. And our recent history especially.

We have escaped the madness that comes with political and social change, but we got stuck in the transitional insanity. We opened Pandora’s box while self-reflecting, and with that it was no longer possible to blame anyone else but ourselves. In an effort to restructure, to enforce our own administration, to have our own goals, we managed to forget a number of urgent aspects from the list of priorities. One of the key problems became the delayed national romanticism.

Macedonia is a multicultural country. It has always been one. And it seems that precisely this fact is our greatest advantage: the unification of diverse ethnicities, the assimilation of distinct cultural identities. Each ethnicity benefits in such a demographic societal structure. Unfortunately, the latest political developments in neighboring Kosovo, Serbia, allow room for manipulation of the concept of peaceful coexistence. As a result, Macedonia acquired new national priorities: instead of economic prosperity and the furthering of the Euro-Atlantic integration process, the main concern became the inner ethnic dissatisfaction and the balancing act required in order to ease the tensions. The situation led to a largely unexpected (at least for those of us who could not grasp the political games) armed conflict in 2001, the subsequent alteration of the constitution, an



Jumping into Lake Matka in Macedonia, *Valerie Tevere*



endless process of easing tensions, and expenditure of valuable energy in satisfying the needs of the predominant ethnic groups – the Macedonians and the Albanians. As a result, the processes of modernization of the state and the establishment of economic stability stagnated. The divide between the two main ethnic groups continues to grow and is now greater than fifteen years ago. Evidently, conflicts can be regulated legally and constitutionally. But mutual trust, something we had before, could not be easily regained.

Events such as these are only an alibi for incompetent and unwise decision-making on the part of our political elite, who seem unable to constructively channel the historical, cultural and political resources offered by the country.

How do we practice power? What we learned from the legacy of the European Union: it is not having power and freedom that is most important, but rather how you put them into practice. Power in Macedonia is a highly problematic phe-

nomenon. This is the source of all the problems in conceiving and implementing a cultural policy strategy. This is a country which has failed all these years to establish elementary principles in accordance with contemporary relevant models of cultural performance – with culture understood as a single interdisciplinary bridge connecting the social dynamics, the world, identity development corridors, the collective and the individual.

Unfortunately, even after sixteen years we find ourselves still talking about totalitarian narratives, which had bearing on us in the not-so-distant past. Totalitarian narratives, dangerously hidden behind apparently democratic rhetoric, rule today as never in the past. This is confirmed by the farcical political party dominations, speculations and frustrations which negate any attempt at practicing an open society.

As I have already emphasized: art and culture here are increasingly being reduced to a means of manipulation in the dirty political games of the even dirtier competing political teams. We have witnessed the logical conclusion of a bygone system, the trivialization of an ideology vehemently condemned by the very political leaders of today, by those who reap its benefits and who have perfectly refined its mechanisms of rule. An autocratic (I would say social-realistic, but that would be an insult to the iconography of social realism, which, after all, offered elation and moral boost) performance which has offered us nothing but a confirmation of the lies and the empty-sounding phrases, of the radical illusion which distracts us from our true condition. The fake manners and the vulgarity of thought only provided us with false acceleration, acted-out scenarios, images reproducing the fatal indifference not only of the specific actors and authors of the speeches, but also of their consumers.

To quote Lenin: What is to be done? We live in a space and time where ideas are not challenged by facts, actors by events, intellectuals by their own thought. The event is understood not so much as action, but as speculation. Our everyday life is turning into an auction where events and lives are bid upon with the help of radical disinformation, where the end user is the scrap heap of history. The main thing that can help us forge lively, fluid and nomadic identities: the constant attempt to link our own image to the image of the Other and vice versa, for the Otherness to be our imperative, which permeates us and which we constantly permeate. As a kaleidoscope into which the mirror multiplies, reflects, estranges and changes the forms of the One through the forms of the Other. This means that we need the gaze and the indication of the Other in which we will see our own true colours and measures of action adequate to space and time. We need communication codes

in which we will recognize systems of constructive action which may appeal to our Oriental-Occidental mentality – which is laid-back, but also keen for change. The possibility for such reflection is been given to us through the various programmes for cooperation with, and support from, Western Europe. Are we taking advantage of these opportunities? Not enough. Unfortunately, it is difficult for us to learn and embrace. ┐

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