

Borja Lasheras

Bosnia in Limbo

Testimonies from the Drina River

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Printed in the EU

To my parents, Javier Ignacio and María Pilar
Za Ifetu, Sakifa (r.i.p.), Biserku, Nefisu, Nerminu, Amira i Melihu

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¹ “The baja figure represents the entire class of war profiteers, small-time hustlers and crooked political peddlers who we euphemistically refer to as the ‘elite’ in Bosnia and Herzegovina” (Mujanović, J., “The Baja Class and the Politics of Participation”, 2014, available at http://www.academia.edu/9018208/The_Baja_Class_and_the_Politics_of_Participation).

Prologue

The book in the reader's hands is an eyewitness account of someone who watches helplessly as, in a country of stunning beauty, the ordinary folk labour under the persistent presence of poisonous ethnic nationalism to which the international community has failed to provide a suitable antidote. An international engagement enthusiastic after the war, then sceptical and now demotivated in the face of local elites with their grip on power and who artificially divide the population.

In Bosnia the ethnicity is generally the same: Yugoslav, meaning South Slavic. What differences there may be are historic-cultural and religious. When such differences are taken to extremes and become *the raison d'être* of political action, the adversary disappears, becoming instead the enemy; sympathisers become believers; respect for other points of view becomes exclusion or even elimination of the opponent. Political parties there no longer represent various ideological options, but rather exclusive nationalist groups—Croats, Serbs and Muslims, often led by the same clans since the 90s. In such zero-sum game politics, deals can be made with adversaries, but not with enemies. That would be considered treason. For this reason, we at the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia, which I headed in the late 1990s, had to unblock institutional crises and take vital decisions for the functioning of the country. In that post-war period these decisions were gladly accepted, notably by citizens, but also, grudgingly, by political leaders, whose power games require the presence of a »benevolent foreign protector«. Two decades on, the majority of these solutions which allowed Bosnia to function are still in place, although forces do militate against them.

We were aware that all that we did should be of a temporary nature, and that those who came after us would have to give back responsibility to local leaders and avoid a damaging dependence syndrome. And so it was. But identity-based division still hampers the normalisation of the country. People such as Milorad Dodik, leader of

the Republika Srpska, who then were not openly rabid nationalists, are now the most toxic ones. Governance is poor; the economy relies on external assistance; institutions do not work; refugee return to their places of origin is limited, consolidating the impact of ethnic cleansing; and, one generation later, reconciliation has not taken place. At this rate, Bosnia will only drift farther from that EU which it claims to be approaching.

This is the atmosphere described for us in such an intelligent and beautiful way by Borja Lasheras in this tale. He shares with us his experience, humanistic vision, affection for Bosnians and a genuine frustration at the inability to do away with the demons in that unique land. A land traversed by the Drina, which, as Ivo Andrić told us, »flows through narrow gorges between steep mountains or through deep ravines...«

Carlos Westendorp y Cabeza
Former Spanish Foreign Minister