

TIPSY goes Bosnia October 14 - 21, 2018

In October 2018, nine students of TIPSY - Tampere International Global Society Students travelled to Sarajevo for a week-long excursion. The trip was organised with the intent to provide students the opportunity to experience and learn about the post-war reconstruction and democratization efforts of the Western Balkans. We met with local and international institutions responsible for the development in the region, and visited places of uttermost importance such as Mostar and Srebrenica. The complex and frustrating situation in the country gave us a lot of food for thought and reflection, of which the report is the outcome. It includes reflections on visits to some local as well as international organisations and historically highly important places or thoughts on other aspects of present-day Bosnia.

The ever question mark on humanity: Srebrenica Genocide Memorial

At the beginning of 1993 Serbs were trying to empty the Non-Serbs from Eastern Bosnia. They succeeded except three small territory around Srebrenica, Zepa and Gorazde. UN Security council adopted Resolution 819 and declared those areas as UN-protected 'safe area'. However, Bosnian Serb force did not agree with the UN resolution and on 11 July 1995, the Bosnian Serb army overran Srebrenica. They took hundreds of Dutch Peacekeepers hostage and forced the civilians, mostly consist of Muslims, to flee. Even worse, the Serb forces killed almost 8000 people mostly men and boys of Bosnian Muslim ethnicity. The largest massacre in Europe after the Second World War can still be felt while visiting the place in person. Lots of pictures and videos keep bringing back the sad memories and keep asking the questions towards humanity. At least I didn't have a proper answer of these questions during our recent visit. I am deeply saddened with the outcome of 1995's incident.

Judge Riad of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia described what happened as 'scenes from hell, written on the darkest pages of human history' (Cutts & Boutroue, 2000). Indeed..

Reference:

Cutts, M., & Boutroue, J. (2000). *The state of the world's refugees, 2000* (pp. 218-229). Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Srebrenica Genocide Memorial

© Philipp Bienek

The United World College in Mostar

In our last field trip in Bosnia we visited the city of Mostar. This beautiful city is well known around the world for its idyllic panoramas of the Neretva river surrounded by mountains and Ottoman architecture. Another iconic point of Mostar is the Stari Most or Old bridge, which was destroyed in 1993 during the Croat-Bosnian war and reconstructed in 2004 as a sign of reconciliation between Croats and Bosniaks.

However, the reconciliation in the city of Mostar has been slow and the resentment and confrontation are present in the political atmosphere. Mostar is the only city in Bosnia and Herzegovina not to organize elections since 2012 due to an impasse between the two biggest political parties and ethnic representatives in the city (Balkan Insight, 2018).



Stari Most, Old bridge in Mostar

© Ninfa Sanchez

The constant presence of division led the United World Colleges (UWC) to establish in 2006 one of their international high schools in Mostar. The UWC is an international education movement with 17 schools around the world. Their main objective is “to use education as a force to unite people, nations and cultures for peace and sustainable future” (UWC.org). In that sense, their campus in Mostar has the commitment not just to educate but being a mediator and a reconciliatory institution.

In our visit to the UWC Mostar, we had the opportunity to see their facilities which they share with the public high school from Mostar. However, the UWC Mostar is the only school in B&H where students from different ethnic background (Serbs, Bosnians and Croats) can study together in the same classrooms. Bosnia and Herzegovina has a detrimental school system named “Two schools under one roof”. This system allowed children with different ethnic background to go to the same school but they take classes in separate classrooms. This system disunified the curriculum, and teaching history of the country is a complicated task. Separating the students according their religion or ethnic background keep the divisions created after the war alive, nourishing the nationalism and hate discourses.



The United World College in Mostar

© Ninfa Sanchez

UWC Mostar is happy to provide an opportunity to teach Bosnian society the benefits of an integrative education, where all ethnicities and other international students can coexist and learn from each other. We listened to Finnish students attending UWC Mostar who told us that it is an amazing experience for everybody to study in such an environment. They explained that the students from Bosnia were really happy to have such an opportunity and that many times the experience is an eye opener from all the social biases in which they grow up.

The work of the UWC Mostar doesn't stop inside the school. As a part of their reconciliatory duties, the UWC organizes several events in order to bring the Mostar society together. According to their public relations representative, the activities organized by the institution are well received by the local community and usually have a big number of participants. This can happen because the UWC is seen by Mostar citizens as a neutral organization which they can trust, and at the same time avoid any political discussion or mistrust among them.

For more information you can read their report on the impact of the UWC in Mostar here:

http://uwcmostar.ba/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/KnjigaStudijaUtjecajaENG_SPREADS.pdf

<http://uwcmostar.ba>

<https://www.uwc.org>



TIPSY visiting the Post-Conflict Research Center in Sarajevo © PCRC

The new Balkan route: A humanitarian crossroad

The main station in Sarajevo is quite a sad and dismal place. Barely ten trains run there a day and the building that is vastly oversized for this number gives you the feeling that someone once had bigger dreams which never came true. Exactly this also seems to be the unfortunate fate of several dozen people, mostly men, who are camping on the otherwise rather empty station square: refugees from Syria, Iraq, Pakistan and many other countries who left their homes out of fear and hoped for a better life in rich European countries such as France or Germany, the Netherlands or any of the Nordic states. The reality is different. The reality is Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Since the beginning of 2018, the intensified and more rigorous border controls between Serbia and Croatia, the former gate to the glorified land, forced the masses to re-evaluate the

tragically famous old Balkan route and search for new ways. New meant Bosnia and Herzegovina. New meant hoping for a country which struggles with its own problems and which does not have the financial resources to facilitate and help all the arriving refugees. A variety of local NGOs as well as museums, such as the National History Museum, try to raise attention with projects and special exhibitions, but the situation is far too complex for the local communities. It is clear that international help is needed.



Serving thousands of meals a day - The Red Cross Refugee Camp in Bihac © Sohrab Taheri (Bavarian Red Cross)

“Our country was not in any way prepared for such a high number of people”, says Amina Kurtagic from the Red Cross of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Currently they prepare three meals a day for over 5.800 refugees in the three camps in Bihac, Velika Kladusa and Mostar; a fourth one in Sarajevo should follow soon to offer proper shelter for the campers in front of the main station, especially as winter is coming. Further, medical and psychological services are offered 24/7 and there are attempts to reunify families.

However, the work is hard, physically as well as emotionally, and the local Red Cross is facing its limits. Also, the facilities itself are very makeshift: the Velika Kladusa camp is a gathering of tents and barracks, and the Bihac one is a complex without windows. “There is help from

other international Red Cross units in form of absolutely essential goods, such as hygienic products, tents, sleeping bags and field kitchens, but in general there is no leeway for big investments”, explains Kurtagic, “as financial support from international organizations is often granted for just a few months. Right now, we can plan until end of November. Let’s see what happens then.”



Dormitories - The Red Cross Refugee Camp in Bihac © Sohrab Taheri (Bavarian Red Cross)

With the Croatian-Bosnian border also being difficult to cross for any of the refugees, there is a possibility that the present situation will turn out to be a long-term one and so everybody, the European Union, the country itself, as well as the local authorities have to work together to find a way to deal with the rising number of refugees in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The local population seems to stand at a crossroad: On the one hand, they themselves often feel forgotten by the national government and the international community, and now financial support and attention are given to the arriving refugees, which is creating envy and fury. On the other hand, no one knows better what it means to be a refugee fearing for its life and just hoping for shelter and a better future than the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Contact Red Cross of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina:

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Impressions of the Red Cross camp in Bihac - Pictures by Sohrab Taheri-Sohi, Bavarian Red Cross, October 2018

<https://brk.pixxio.media/workspace/pixxio/index.html?gsm=93fb5581acdbe4152276ab0165f20007&gs=zPS41MnEszKyb7By5&gl=de>

Reading advices:

“Problems mount for for migrants on new Balkan route into EU” (Irish Times - 05.08.2018)

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/problems-mount-for-migrants-on-new-balkan-route-into-eu-1.3587213>

“Refugees on new Balkan route stuck in limbo” (dw.com - 03.07.2018)

<https://www.dw.com/en/refugees-on-new-balkan-route-stuck-in-limbo/a-44509373>

“Bosnian police block migrants from reaching EU member Croatia” (Al Jazeera - 18.06.2018)

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2018/06/bosnian-police-block-migrants-reaching-eu-member-croatia-180618144823635.html>



Group picture in the center of Sarajevo

Bosnia and the EU

The European Union and individual member states are very active in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, Austria is the biggest foreign investor in the country. However, our discussions and conversations in Bosnia showed that the EU has a highly ambiguous reputation in the country. Not only do many people that we talked to have the feeling that the EU left the country and its population alone during the time of war, but also today they perceive the EU-Bosnia relations as dishonest and see no real interest in Bosnia by the Union.

The EU will not include any further member states with unsolved disputes or populist and undemocratic tendencies. Too many problems challenge the EU at the moment: for example, Croatia and Slovenia and their unsolved border conflict or right-wing and anti-democratic tendencies in Poland and Hungary. However, also the format of the current association process creates doubts about the EU's sincerity in regard to a possible future membership of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even though Bosnia has at the moment only the status of a "potential candidate country" (compared to Albania, Serbia, Macedonia, and Montenegro that are all candidate states), the people we talked to are under the impression that the EU practically treats the Western Balkan as a package, for instance in the Stabilisation and Association Process or the "EU-Western Balkan Summit" in May 2018.

This practice brings advantages and disadvantages. Unfortunately, as it was commonly expressed during our conversations, this underpins the interpretation that the process cannot be successful for Bosnia as long as Serbia does not solve the conflict with Kosovo, which means, from the perspective of the EU, recognizing Kosovo as an independent state. At the same time, the EU's procedure might bring the advantage that the autonomous entity of Republika Srpska, which is dominated by Bosnian-Serbs, will not strive for an annexation to Serbia, as this would most-likely harm Serbia's attempt to become an EU member state and set back the rapprochement of Bosnia and Herzegovina and, therefore, of all countries dealt in the package "Western Balkan". Year 2025 as the year when Serbia and Montenegro could

join EU, as stated by Jean Claude Juncker in 2017, was not perceived as anyhow realistic during our conversations. Consequently, the perspective for Bosnia is perceived as even worse, let alone that some people do not even see their country as “ready” for the EU.

Reading advice:

“5 takeaways from EU’s big Balkan get-together” (Politico - 23.05.2018)

<https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-western-balkans-sofia-summit-takeaways-membership-talks-enlargement/>



Sarajevo Rose in front of the SCC shopping centre

© Roosa Rahikka

Lessons from history

While seeing the many graveyards and the signs of war that remind us of the atrocities of the 1990s during the Yugoslav wars, certain questions inevitably came to mind: how was this possible, how are humans capable of such violence in general and most importantly, what

leads them to such action or what justifies it in their minds? At a time when divisions among political, ethnic, religious, cultural and social lines are growing, we should look at the Yugoslav wars and the events that took place during the time as warnings of where these divisions and increasing discord can ultimately lead to and how difficult it is to heal. The human capability to commit evil should not be underestimated or thought of as something completely distant. Whether it is the Srebrenica massacre that happened as recently as 1995 or the countless other massacres that have taken place within the last 100 years and throughout human history, these events seem to be commonly thought of as something remote, or worse yet, not thought about at all. Visiting Srebrenica brought a sense of immediacy to the events that took place in 1995. Perhaps most importantly, it gave valuable perspective into today's political conditions, which do not seem to be headed towards a positive direction, as a mix of authoritarian, ethno-nationalist and populist politics, that both exploits and intensifies resentments and divisions, is on the rise throughout much of the world.

Reading advices:

“In Bosnia, Entrenched Ethnic Divisions Are a Warning to the World” (New York Times - 19.11.2018)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/19/world/europe/mostar-bosnia-ethnic-divisions-nationalism.html>

“ Why Bannon Is Meddling With Bosnia” (NYR - 05.09.2018)

<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/09/05/why-bannon-is-meddling-with-bosnia/>



TIPSY visits the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina

© OSCE

Contrasts and the balance between remembering and moving on

What struck me as the most interesting thing when it came to Bosnia was essentially the contrast that exists between thinking about the war being *already* 20 years ago and *only* 20 years ago at the same time. Going in, for me it really was “oh we are going to this country that has a war 20 years ago, that ought to be interesting” and coming out was “this country has a war *only* 20 years ago?!” To elaborate:

Bosnia was an experience of contrasts: there was the contrast between the old and the new towns in Sarajevo, the fancy hotels and the buildings covered in bullet holes, the mosques, cathedrals and synagogues all along the same 200m street, and the people who were tired of politics and just wanted to be, but remembered everything from the Sarajevo siege or the genocides. As an outsider I could never say I understand the Bosnian experience, but after this opportunity to visit the country and hear some of its people, I still want to do my best to dissect exactly what I felt during this week.

I feel like first, apart from the absolute beauty of Sarajevo as a city, we were hit with the negative of it all. We visited the Post Conflict Research Centre, where we were told about the crisis the Bosnian society is in when it comes to the overly complicated political system

established by the Dayton agreement in 1995. For me this was all new information, but it offered an interesting look into the difficulty of moving on from the crisis; literally, this country is ruled by the system that was first established to stop the violent conflict. We were told about how there is not enough initiative behind pushing for a change, as people generally had grown tired of politics and were just looking to live in peace for a while. The politics in this country seemed stuck.

Pretty soon the realisation of just how *little* ago the war had happened started to draw in. I had known that the war was happening when I was born in 1994, but somehow that was different from actually fully realising it. At least I tend to think about times ages ago when I think about war in Europe. But then we started talking about how everything pretty much was as modern in the 90s as it was now, how so many of our favourite Hollywood movies came out the same year as 8000 Muslims were killed in Srebrenica during just one week. How this country hosted the winter Olympics *before* they had a destructive war. Maybe these are things that are obvious to someone, but to me they brought a lot of things into perspective.

We had the opportunity to discuss education in Bosnia with a woman from the OCSE, which was very interesting as we had been discussing the difficulty of producing an “official history” of the war that could be taught to children in school. There sure were difficulties, as we learned that it was very hard to push anything into the curriculums, that were not national to begin with, on top of the fact that children on different ethnicities weren’t even taught in the same classrooms.

However, there is also a surprising moment of positivity I remember from this talk. I had done some counting in my head and come to the conclusion that this country must have a problem with people who have gaps in their education due to the war that lasted for so long. As I asked the woman about this she laughed and told me that she hadn’t gone to school for two whole years in her youth. Again, I was struck with just how little ago the war had actually been, as this woman was probably younger than my parents. However, she pointed out that it had never been an issue, that people sure had stopped going to school for a while but simply decided not to make a problem out of it.



Sarajevo at night

© Jussi Laatikainen

A similar moment of positivity had struck me during the talks with our tour guide, a man who had been born in Sarajevo during the siege. He told us about the city of Sarajevo, but also explained us things about the Bosnian society from his point of view. He told us how he was worried about the nationalist discourses in the Republika Srpska. He took us to the Srebrenica genocide site and memorial, which for a Muslim born two years before the genocide cannot be an easy experience. However, on the way back he told us about the significance of moving on and living together as one Bosnian society. The same man who to me felt like someone who could have had every reason to be bitter, was telling me about the importance of looking to all sides of the story, including the opposing one.

I really did leave Bosnia thinking the war was “only” 20 years ago, but again it comes with a duality. I felt the shock of something so horrible happening in the society so little ago. I understood almost brutally how much the country had suffered and how long it still had to go to fully get back on its feet. But at the same time, in the light of what the people like our guide and the woman at OCSE had told me, I caught myself thinking “*this country has a war only 20 years ago and the people have already come this far?*”

I believe there will always be a difficulty when it comes to the battle between remembering and moving on, but I think Bosnia gave an excellent chance to see it in real life to better understand it during and after my studies in peace research.

More impressions from TIPSY's Bosnia excursion 14 - 21 October 2018



Former UNPROFOR Headquarter in Potočari

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Reconstructed former City Hall in Sarajevo

© Roosa Rahikka



View on Sarajevo from Mountain Trebević

© Jussi Laatikainen