

Kommentar von Peter Pelz (Soul of Europe, UK):

I had a long cry this morning reading this affecting report about the Bosnia War. I'm still crying, for reasons this letter will explain. The parallels with Ukraine are of course clear as crystal, and it is correct to say that though the killing in Bosnia has stopped it is still a frozen war.

The report makes me thoughtful and triggers this piece. I hope it will help understanding my 'Soul of Europe' approach to what is going on in Ukraine: the process that needs to happen, as soon as possible.

There is incidentally a parallel with extreme far-right groups exerting undue influence. The Serbs claimed that Islamic terrorists were planning to kill Serbs. At a now notorious speech given by Milosevic, then President of Yugoslavia, just before he unleashed the war that broke up the country he paid agitators to cause a fracas at the back of the crowd he was addressing in Kosovo on the Field of Blackbirds (site of the famous defeat of the Serbs by the Ottomans in the 14th century: history is mythology there, and what happened centuries ago is still understood as something that happened yesterday). He then blamed the attacks on Muslims and roused the crowd in exactly the way he wanted. In fact Bosnian Muslims were mostly secularised then and were no threat to their Orthodox and Catholic neighbours. But, and here there is a parallel with the present situation in Ukraine, when the conflict started Mujahedin from the war in Afghanistan, the future terrorists that Americans had supported to drive Soviet communists out of the country, came to Bosnia to protect their Muslim brothers and sisters. They were greeted with mixed feelings. On the one hand Muslims were grateful to have their fighting support, but on the other hand they felt uncomfortable with the way the Mujahedin criticised their secular way of life. Women began to wear veils, something alien to Bosnia. Muslim men began to organise themselves against Serb aggression. We met several on our project to build a memorial at the Omarska killing camp. I write self-critically about them in my book *the white house - from Fear to a Handshake*, (published by O Books but accessible on my website: www.atenderbridge.com) and acknowledge we made a serious mistake in not doing more to get these significant figures from their community on board. At the time we called them 'spoilers' in our process of bringing people from all sides to talk and create new friendships across the bitter bloodied divide. We achieved that but we should have done so much more with those people who basically and understandably after what they had suffered wanted to punish all Serbs and have nothing to do with them. They were right to criticise the International Community which failed wretchedly to deal with the matter of

justice, so those responsible for the worst atrocities were allowed. with only a few exceptions, to carry on running their towns, cities and country. I describe this in *the white house - from Fear to a Handshake*, a book I'm proud of because it is honest about the process, the failures as well as successes. People should hopefully learn from the mistakes in particular.

The report I attach about Mirsad (<https://www.politico.eu/article/bosnia-refugees-bitter-lesson-ukraine-war/>) triggered this letter because for a moment I recognised him as a significant person we came to know in Bosnia. His story is identical in almost every detail, but in Prijedor, not Srebrenica. It made me think about what we did all the years we spent in Bosnia going into that situation in the year 2000 with staggering naivety, that turned out to be a blessing. Without such naivety we would not have had the nerve to persuade all these community leaders, religious and political, to attend a peace mediation Consultation in Coventry during September 2001, literally days after 9:11. Looking back I realise we had some nerve doing that, the kind of nerve that only exists when you are actually ignorant of the dangers. The Mirsad we knew was an exceptional person. I thankfully could pay tribute to him in *the white house - from Fear to a Handshake*. Despite having been tortured and suffered much, including years of exile in Germany, he returned to his home village with wife and two sons (the Mirsad in the attached report had two daughters, the only other difference) and took over leadership of his decimated community which meant cooperating with people who had tried to kill him, and in fact had been his torturers. He invited us to his home because he appreciated and supported our process. Taking us around the farm property he pointed to where various members of his family had been shot and killed. How does one ever recover from such traumas? Mirsad for all his sweet gentle nature (he forbade his sons to play with toy guns, saying that war and fighting is never the answer.... please Boris Johnson and all leaders learn from this man!) he has an inner strength of steel, a defiance and fearlessness that enables him to talk on an equal footing with the Serb community leaders, including his arch enemy the mayor of Prijedor. In all my life I have never met a more extraordinary exemplary human being than Mirsad Duratevic.

When we returned to Prijedor for the opening of the Ferhadija Mosque, five years after our ultimately failed project to build a memorial at the Omarska killing camp I felt acute guilt and embarrassment, ashamed to meet the people who I felt we had let down. In fact they were delighted to meet us. Just remembering Mirsad standing by his car looking at us with such a lovely

friendly smile brings tears to my eyes. I couldn't understand why they were so forgiving. Mirsad told us he never gave up hope to create a memorial, and that he understood we could do no more than what we did. We had brought Orthodox Serbs, Muslim Bosniaks and Catholic Croats together, especially the younger generation, still old enough to remember the war that raged when they were infants and who now bonded and have remained friends ever since. That touched him. Then I remembered him sitting at the final event when all these young people came together, talking excitedly, children of former enemies now listening to each other in friendship and collaboration. He watched them. Then he looked at me silently, smiling, and to my astonishment his eyes were full of tears. Afterwards he told me he had never believed this could be possible.

Yes, there are a lot of tears in my telling, but if you knew Bosnians as I came to do, you'd know that emotions are exceptionally intense there and alongside naivety which comes with humility and openness, emotion is an essential part of any peace process.

I then raised my disappointment and sense of failure with Asra, the aunt of Anel, one of our project directors. She had been deputy mayor, the nominal Muslim designated by the Dayton Accord to work alongside the Serb mayor, a leading figure in the war and persecution of Muslims who still ran the place. She should have been upset and angry with me, but instead she reassured and comforted me. The memorial would come one day, she was certain, but what we had done mattered. She treasured memories of meetings we organized in her garden under the blossoming plum trees where young people from the three ethnic communities: journalists, teachers, NGO directors and sportsmen (Zoran, our other project director, a Croat Serb, was a star footballer), musicians (the lead singer of a local band gave me a DVD about the war) sat together discussing the past, present and future. I describe these meetings in my book. Asra and Mirsad taught me that the process is slow and however much we thought we had failed them, in fact we had encouraged and supported them when they most needed it. Both of them told me that it is now up to the people, not agents like us from the outside, who needed to sort out their problems. We had given them friendship and courage to take initiatives further which they have been doing steadfastly ever since. Both were convinced a memorial will eventually be in place at the Omarska killing camp.

Hopefully this letter gives an idea of what the Soul of Europe is planning to do now, but how this process might work in Ukraine is a different matter. God knows. This process is however essential and urgent. It should have begun

years ago. I am despairing of our PM whose photo-ops with Ukraine are ones of obscenely hypocritical self-interest, blatant and dangerous distractions from his failings as leader of the UK.

The only task for countries not involved in the war is to help end it rather than focus exclusively on perpetual arming which prolongs conflict indefinitely. The killing and destruction have to stop now. Only then can the talking and meeting between people start, as soon as possible ... on the ground, under fruit trees.

Yes, it will be hard. War is always the easier option. But people actually do want peace. I learnt that glaringly obvious truth in Bosnia, a truth anyone can grasp. People do not want war. None of them do, as simple as that. War is a political expediency. It is this desire for peacefully living together that helped us with whatever successes we might have had in Bosnia. This is all people want, as they kept telling us there: to have a safe place to live, work, bring up children, care for their families – and get on with neighbours whoever they might be. This truth applies to all sides, and will always be the starting point for any negotiations and future plans.

Of course, and it needs repeating, naivety is an essential quality for the process, as is emotion.

This letter is a heartfelt thank you to the attached report which reminded me of Mirsad, moved me so much and brought back many memories.

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On Mon, May 2, 2022 at 7:24 AM Dreier <dreier.marl@freenet.de> wrote:
On homepage Amos-Zeitschrift/Ukraine you find about 130 Texts
Hartmut

Von meinem iPhone gesendet

Am 02.05.2022 um 08:21 schrieb Dreier <dreier.marl@freenet.de>:

Von meinem iPhone gesendet

Am 02.05.2022 um 00:32 schrieb Peter Pelz <pelzp72@gmail.com>:

Wonderful to hear from you dear Hartmut and Almuth.

In fact we were going to write to you anyway, to keep you posted about the Soul of Europe response to the Ukraine catastrophe. People keep asking us to do something, and they are right that the talking has to start immediately, not waiting for the conflict to end (and it looks set to continue indefinitely with no end of death and destruction, let alone the danger of World War 3). Donald is writing something, and we already have Rowan Williams and Bishop Malkhaz on board as well as others to get the ball rolling. We very much want you to be on board too, even just to communicate with and see what can be done practically to help the talking.

This very short letter is just to let you know you will be hearing more from us, and also to send you both and all of you our warmest wishes, and prayers that all of us remain as well as we can.

Peter

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