Balkan Stories, Street Art and the Human Condition

In March of this year, I travelled with a few others from the MIIS community to Belgrade in Serbia, Pristina in Kosovo, Dubrovnik in Croatia, and Mostar, Srebrenica and Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina (with pitstops in Albania and Montenegro). We embarked on this itinerary with the purpose of examining and analyzing the status of peace and conflict resolution in the Balkans, a region that is within one generation of some of the most monumental instances of violence in modern history.

The crisis in the Balkans after the fall of Yugoslavia led to the humanitarian crises that mobilized international institutions to classify and prosecute war crimes such as ethnic cleansing and systematic rape. While transformative with regards to legal frameworks and academic theory, this response is widely considered to have been tragically belated and consistently insufficient in achieving actual reconciliation among communities drowning in bloody memories. Ironically, the one thing Serbian, Kosovan, Croatian and Bosnian citizens currently seem to have in common is the sensation of being failed by institutions of peace and governance meant to serve them.

We had studied this history, but the opportunity to visit its setting revealed to us some of the complexity that is invariably lost when events are frozen in a timeline. The societies we were visiting were as full of liveliness and cultural expression as they were shadowed with pain. On one hand, our meetings and discussions with activists, citizens, veterans and other peace practitioners made it clear that the Balkan social fabric has transformed from integrated multiculturalism to a fraying patchwork of isolating identities. On the other hand, in addition to witnessing the legacies of extreme violence, we also experienced Balkan hospitality. We ate copious amounts of bread with ajvar and kaymak and drank deceptively sweet rakija and beautifully bitter Bosnian coffee. We sat through a 9-hour bus ride from Kosovo to Croatia that was so magnificent I was actually a little sad to finish it. Even more incredible than these views were the people we met who, with equal parts laughter and solemnity, painted a dynamic picture of the human condition and the ways in which it can turn against itself.

So far, I have discussed history and observations, but the fact is that these are living memories. When Serbian activists, Kosovan mediators, Croatian religious leaders and Bosnian humanitarians shared with us their stories, we became part of an exchange that is as old as time: that of pain for progress. In this transaction, wounds are made vulnerable, and in return, promises are made to learn and contribute to a better future. My colleagues and I are privileged to have participated in that exchange, but it is imperative that we engage in our role with the utmost honesty. Our purpose is to interrupt cycles of conflict, but too often, in our
efforts to understand, we invade stories and memories. I believe we must avoid the pattern of conquering knowledge in pursuit of solutions, because very often the humans we aim to serve get sidelined (or even trampled) in the process. This means we need to practice constant self-reflection and stringently situating ourselves in a bigger picture. A fledgling International Affairs professional quite literally has the world in front of her to work with. Most find this opportunity exciting, many find it daunting, but I am not sure that many of us find it humbling.

With that being said, and with this framework of values as my guide, there are messages that I am in a position to communicate. They are best expressed by the words of individuals we met* and the art painted on the streets of cities we visited:

“This is my life. I am the subject and object that you are studying.”- Svetlana, Peace Activist, Development Professional, Trip Organizer and Guide.

“Never let anyone dominate you.”- Mufti of Serbia, Abdullah Numan

“Things in Serbia are the worst that they have been since the war.”- Nemanja Stjepanovic, Humanitarian Law Centre

*Some quotes have been paraphrased for clarity or according to memory.
Chatkara

Is life always this hard or is just when you're a kid?

Da'nt
“In a time of need, you have to be a little crazy to think of other people instead of just yourself.”

“Dignity is the only thing you have left during war” - Romana Tomic, DEŠA – Dubrovnik, NGO

Pristina, Kosovo

“How to turn oppression on its head: make its repressive mechanisms a badge of honor. Make its shows of power a joke. Define an agenda; agree on what you agree and on what you disagree. It’s one step at a time.

Every generation of revolutionaries needs to relearn this for themselves.”- Srdja Popovic, Political Activist, Founder of nonviolent resistance movement OTPOR!

“You can’t tell people what to think.” - Cedomila Marinkovic, Byzantologist and expert on Judaism

A mortar shelling crater painted with resin into a “Sarajevo Rose.” These can be found all over the city, commemorating the Siege of Sarajevo.
“When you are closer to the truth, you are some kind of ambassador of the dialogue.” - Vjeran Martic, Roman Catholic Diocese of Dubrovnik

“I take hope from the fact that there has been no push for revenge” - Guide and Survivor, Srebrenica Genocide Memorial

“There is a distinction between responsibility and guilt” - Adnan Hasanbegovic, Founder of Center for Nonviolent Action, Combat Veteran
“Whoever understands the history of the Balkans understands the history of the whole world” - Elsa Lojic*, Guide, Sarajevo

* Our guide was a secondary source for this quote, original source is unknown.