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Politics of Identity and Symbolism in Postwar

Mostar (1996-2005)

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Politics of identity and symbolism in postwar Mostar (1996-2005)

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Fragmentation and cohesion are two opposed funding forces and elements of Mostar demographic, cultural and political history. A sense of distinction and uniqueness has traditionally been, and still is, an important aspect of the local urban identity, but Mostar's historical picture of cohesion can be easily reversed underlying the high difficulties in, and the strong reluctance to cooperation and pacific coexistence between groups.

Many journalists and contemporary analysts have been denouncing what appears to be the basic and most striking feature of Mostar after the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s: a strong and absolute political, ethnic, religious and national division between East and West Mostar. Analyses referred sometime to the past, to explain and legitimize the state of permanent separation and conflicts among the population of Mostar. Still, fieldwork studies, and reports from locally based organizations, also single out a strong presence of tolerance and interaction between the people. There is a certain degree of uncertainty in the interpretations of Mostar's past and present society, which is reproduced in the uncertainty of the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina between instability, little hope, necessity, and lacks of alternatives. This is the case also of the representations and interpretations of Yugoslavian 20th history, often presented in different ways and with opposite images. The collapse of the Habsburg empire, the Yugoslav 1918 unification, the Partisan struggle, the growth of

¹ Eric Gobetti is responsible for the first chapter (*Separation*), Vanni d'Alessio for the second one (*Integration*).

mixed marriages and of a specific and shared Yugoslavian culture, have been perceived as signs of a unifying process. On the contrary, the interwar instability, the civil war and massacres in World War II, and the wars of Yugoslav secession, have been read as signs of an inevitable process towards disintegration. The impressive number of monographs and studies on Yugoslavia and on its successor states, which has appeared since the very beginning of the 1990s, has left open these apparent contradictions. Similarly, for Mostar history, the question is still open on whether in the local society the trends towards fragmentation were stronger than the ones towards cohesion. The sense of belonging to a *Mostarian* specific identity unified the local inhabitants, regardless of the big demographic transformations in the 20th century, the strong urbanization and the population shifts, and despite the political and cultural conflicts arisen in the moments of crisis. Still today, the idea of being a Mostarian, and consequently to belong to a community which comprises the whole population, is less rejected than one might expect, given the war and the harsh relationships between the different groups.

In this article, our intention is precisely to focus on the tendencies towards separation and conflict, and on those towards cohesion and cooperation in Mostar, and to see how these attitudes and inclinations have interacted in the very recent history. Our paper is based on a research we are conducting on the evolution of the political geography in Mostar after the 1990s war. The research has started in association with a project of an ethnographic film on postwar Mostar.² The task of our research, partly overlapping with the fieldwork for the ethnographic film, has been to observe the visual traces and discuss the symbolism in the urban public space to analyze the

² The basic material for this research is composed of the visual footage and interviews taken during the 2004-2006 filming of the ethnographic film on Postwar Mostar “Around Mostar, the Bridge and Bruce Lee” by Sanja Puljar and the authors of this text, with the help of the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in Zagreb. The authors would also like to thank Stephanie Roland, whose research and advices were very useful as an orientation for our work.

extent of division and integration in town. Therefore, in our research we are trying to observe how the two main and dominant ethnic and national groups present in Mostar since the end of the war have been interacting in the public arena, and to observe the elements of conflict and cooperation between them and among the whole population.

I. SEPARATION

Until the 1990s war Mostar was able to integrate three national groups (four, including Yugoslavs), none of them with a clear and strong dominance over the others in the urban space. During the war, after the mass flee of the Serbs and the evaporation of the Yugoslavs, radical nationalist Croats and Bosniacs (Bosnian-Herzegovinian Muslims) took power in town. Many Croats and Bosniacs also fled and many others settled in Mostar, while not all the emigrants returned after the war.³ The war, the population movements, and the war itself produced national homogeneity and polarization in town and a thick border between an East Mostar dominated by Bosniacs and a West Mostar dominated by Croats. The postwar reconstruction of the physical and social urban infrastructure enhanced polarization and Mostar public space has become a symbolic battlefield and a land to mark in a continuation of the war by other means.

Two completely separated cities came out of the clash between the Croatian Army in Bosnia-Herzegovina (*HVO*) and the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Army (*Armija BiH*). On the two sides of the frontline, socio-economic life has developed in two completely separate ways, giving the impression that the ethnic and national border had always been there. Two different economies divide the town: the western side

³ In 1991 Mostar numbered 126.000 people of which 34,5% Bosniacs (+ 3,5% from 1981), 34% Croats (+0,5%), 19% Serbs (+0,5%) and 10% Yugoslavs (-5%) (official censuses). In 1998 population had dropped to 106.000 people (-16%), of which 52,2% Bosniacs, 44,7% Croats and 2% Serbs (UNHCR statistics). More recent statistics speak of circa 105.000 thousand residents, of which about 50 thousand are Croats and 50 thousand are Bosniacs.

principally based on trade and industry, and the historic center in the eastern side on tourism. To some extent, this division was already present before, but did not have a clear ethnic or national connotation. Regardless of the unification of the administration and the police, and the growth of free movement from one side to the other, the signs of two alienated societies are still visible and strong. The difference is easy to spot because of the national symbols displayed inside and outside private houses, shops and cafes, and buildings of religious and cultural centers, firms and offices. This exteriorization of national symbols has decreased in the years, and official and institutional buildings offer a full set of new a-national symbols, but the polarization goes beyond its visible appearance, as it deeply penetrated the physical control of infrastructures and services. The savage use of the public space and resources has intertwined with the reconstruction, which has been a unique occasion to build economic fortunes, reinforce political ties and social networks inside the two facing national communities.

[PHOTO – Mostar_1⁴]

After the 1990s war, churches and mosques were the first buildings to be rebuilt, in bigger size and number. For the first time an Islamic theological school (*Medresa*) and a Catholic theological school were established. Foreign diplomatic offices appeared very soon, following the bipolar schematics, as shown by the Croatian and the Turkish consulates, and the Iranian one, which lasted from 1993 to 1998, as well as by the cultural centers opened or strongly subsidized by foreign countries (mainly Croatia, but also Arabic countries). Furthermore, the fast nationalization of the common spaces meant not just separated cemeteries, but also nationally based monuments, newspapers, televisions, schools and universities,

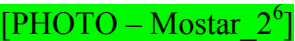
⁴ Photo: Mostar_1: *Symbolic division of the space: churches and mosques.*

telecommunication and postal systems, hospitals, prisons, theatres and cultural organizations. The sense of separation was strongly interiorized in the daily habits, in perceptions and representations, including recurrent linguistic expressions as *tamo/ovamo* (“there/here”) and *mi/oni* (“us/them”).

Polarization of the common symbols: the partisan heritage

The symbolic re-positioning of the local pluralist urban identity had already started in the 1980s, but during and after the war the phenomenon radicalized. The common city symbols followed this process of polarization. The memory of the unitary partisan struggle and the *Stari Most* (Old Bridge) ceased to be symbols of the town for all its inhabitants and became more associated with the Muslims and their historical heritage. In West Mostar the name of the streets (mostly dating from the socialist times) was changed during the 1990s, except for *Ulica Stjepana Radića* (named after the famous interwar Croatian political leader). There is a street for the victims of communism (*Ulica žrtvava komunizma*), replacing the street entitled to the victims of fascism (*Ulica žrtvava fašizma*). Other streets honor many old Croatian cultural and political figures. Among the latter, we find also ministers of the NDH quisling state, such as Mile Budak, Vjekoslav Vrančić, Ante Vokić and Mladen Lorković, even though not the main leaders, like Ante Pavelić or Eugen Kvaternik. Budak was also a writer, and Vokić and Lorković (who share together a name of a street) were killed because of their (very late) opposition to the fascist regime. Perhaps, these street names were also chosen because they represent a cleaner face of the darkest side of Croatian history.

In East Mostar instead, the old partisan statues and plaques were rebuilt after the war and put back in place, while the streets kept the names they had during the

socialist period, like *Ulica Maršala Tita* and the bridge *Titov Most*. The 25th of November is still celebrated the famous congress of the Partisan council (AVNOJ⁵) in World War II, in which Bosnia-Herzegovina was declared one of the founding republics of the future socialist state. On that day Bosniac institutional figures commemorate the fallen partisans by placing a crown of flowers on the partisan monumental cemetery.  This very impressive architectural monument, located in West Mostar, for years has been the pride and the symbol of town, and a main tourist site. After the war it was abandoned and vandalized. Following the concern expressed by intellectuals in foreign media and by the local partisan veterans' organization, the monument was restored with international sponsorships, but it is often vandalized and covered with graffiti, many of which have a clear fascist and Croatian nationalist connotation.

Croatian public opinion has never showed any interest in the memory of partisan struggle. On this side, the attitude towards socialist history reflects their general attitude towards the Yugoslavian heritage, and what has been regarded as an artificially imposed tolerance and coexistence. Vice versa, for the Bosniac public opinion, the memory of the socialist past is honored and revived, as it belongs to the *national* history of a multiethnic Bosnia-Herzegovina, a state which is itself considered an example of tolerance, born and survived under constant pressure and jeopardy by neighbor nationalisms. In fact, partisan memory is a founding element of Bosniac identity and history. Bosniac leaders claim that there were many more Mostar Muslims among partisans than Croats, but it was during the years of Yugoslavia and

⁵ The Anti-Fascist Council of the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (*Antifašističko V(ij)eće Narodnog Oslobođenja Jugoslavije*) met in the Bosnian town of Jaice for its second conference from November 21st to November 29th, 1943.

⁶ Photo: Mostar_2: The Partisan's Monumental Cemetery in West Mostar (before the war).

the 1990s wars that the memory of World War II became a Bosniac symbolical space.⁷ Not surprisingly, the WWII Mostar veteran organization is essentially controlled by local Bosniacs.

The Old Bridge

Although the Mostar Old Bridge is another kind of symbol and has a very different history, its heritage has been nationalized and its Muslim connotation has been strengthened, already before Yugoslavia collapsed. Built during the Ottoman domination in 1566, the bridge was always a *polysemic* symbol, a shared emblem of the town, which embedded the memory of the Muslim heritage. As it has been pointed out by Sylvie Ramel, the link to the Muslim heritage of the town had always been present, but during the 1970's Bosniac intellectuals started to emphasize it. The ideological battles carried on during the 1990s war, and the destruction of the bridge itself, highly contributed to the over-symbolization of the Bridge as a purely Muslim belonging. By targeting and destructing the Old Bridge, the Croatian army assigned a sort of *collective* guilt to Croats. For some members of the Croatian community, the Old Bridge became a target because it connected two sides of the river Neretva both in the Muslim hands, while for some members of the Muslim community and for many international observers it was destroyed as a shared symbol. It is hard disputable that the bridge was destroyed because of its Muslim connotation, but it is also possible that psychological warfare played a role (more than strong strategic reasons).

After the war, the international organizations and governments, aiming to promote reconciliation in Mostar, strongly insisted on its reconstruction, thus overestimating the capacities of the bridge, in a new context, to serve as a shared

⁷ Interview with Alija Bjevic, President of the Mostar Veterans' association, Mostar, April 2006 .

symbol towards reconciliation in a newly unified town.⁸ Bosniac authorities insisted for the construction of a replica of the *Stari Most*, implicitly trying to resettle the situation as it was before and to erase the traces of the war (instead of facing them). Anyway, the way the bridge was restored did not help to build a sense of collective identification. The original plans of reconstruction, intended to promote concrete collaboration between Croatians and Bosniacs, were left aside, mostly for problems of time and funding, and a Turkish firm conducted the work with the help coming from the Bosniac side. Moreover, the official opening of the bridge in 2004 raised some criticisms. The bridge has been newly inaugurated, with the participation of high institutions and strong world media coverage. It was a spectacular event to which, for security reasons, Mostarians were not admitted without special passes. Many Mostarians got the impression that the reconstruction was more an international affair than something directed to the local community. One side of the town population looked at the images on television, while the other showed indifference. [PHOTO – Mostar_3⁹]

Stari Most is included in the historic and tourist part of the town, but it does not unify the two sides of the town. The border between the two *sides* of Mostar runs along the war frontline, further west to the river. The area of the bridge is therefore compactly Bosniac, although before the war, the situation was not so clear. For instance, the owners of cafes and restaurants around the bridge were not only Bosniacs. Once, the famous ritual of diving from the bridge was not only limited to Bosniacs, as now it seems to be. A very recent book on the history of the divers (*Mostarski ikari*) is very eloquent on the symbolic use by one side of this old Mostar ritual, as an example of the use of elements of a common memory and tradition for

⁸ Interview with the writer Veselin Gatalo, Mostar July 2004.

⁹ Photo: Mostar_3: *The new Old Bridge: the inauguration event.*

the construction of a separate history (Pašić 2004). The book was published by the association of divers, which is located on one of the entrances to the bridge. The club associates help keeping the bridge clean and meet in the club, which is normally open, and with their constant presence, they sort of protect and “guard” the Old Bridge. In some occasions this association has also had a political visibility. This happened in 2005, when all Mostar Bosniac based political parties were asked to step back from their support to the Mayor (Ljubo Bešlić, a Croat), because he was an officer of the Croatian Army in town. This army (as stated by the leader of the association in that occasion) “had destroyed *Stari most*, had celebrated its destruction, and interned and killed innocent Mostarians.”¹⁰

The bridge remains an essential symbol of the whole city, even if it will hardly serve as a connection between cultures and nations as long as one part of the town population will be, implicitly or explicitly, indicated as collectively responsible for its destruction and as long as the Bosniacs will associate their martyrdom to the destruction of the bridge. In fact, the claim of the wrongs by the latter side is a legitimate position and deserves respect. Nevertheless, it is also a sort of a cage, blocking and limiting tendencies towards integration and civic settlement. The sense of being on the victim’s side keeps the Bosniacs on seeking for compensation, and also keeps them more than the others to interpret the reality and judge the people and their acts or activities through national lens and referring to the wartime as the basic or only valuable parameter of opinion.

¹⁰ Bljesak.info. BiH Internet Magazin, 28.08.2005, ”Teške optužbe 'Mostara' na račun mostarskog gradonačelnika” [“(…) da je brigadir HVO-a, vojske koja je srušila Stari most, proslavljala njegovo rušenje, zatvarala i ubijala nevine Mostarce”.] <http://arhiva.bljesak.info/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=22503> (Lastviewed 21.12.2006).

II. INTEGRATION

International efforts

International governmental organizations and especially the office of the European Union Administration in Mostar (EUAM) led by Hans Koschnick tried hard to promote reconciliation between the two sides of Mostar. As in the case of the Old Bridge, to establish a positive collaboration with both communities, they have substantially dealt with the local leaders of the Croatian and Bosniac main Bosnian-Herzegovinian nationalist parties. They had derived their authority from the balance of power (on a local and country level) as emerged from the war. Especially due to the reconstruction of public buildings and infrastructures, and to the creation of new services for the population, local leaders could manage big amounts of resources. This despite the severe limitations, issued at times, on how economic resources had to be utilized. This helped them to maintain their economic and political power. Public works and the rebuilt of pre-existing or newly established cultural organizations, social, welfare and health facilities, were heavily financed by foreign governments, city administrations or via NGOs. The priority of the needs was established in collaboration, communication and/or in compromise with the leaders of the two communities, whose decisions were more based on their economic interests or their obligations with the web of their political and economic ties, and much less on the real needs of the population (Bazzocchi 2002 and 2003). The international governments and organizations, legitimizing and strengthening the public and political authority of these leaders, as a consequence helped maintain and reinforce the polarization.

A big aim of the representative of the European Union in Mostar was to unify the administration. Croatian leaders opposed the reunification, as they feared to lose

power in a new balance of power. Many people from West Mostar strongly disagreed with the idea of a single unified town, and the representative found himself in perilous situations, as when, in February 1996, hard core Croatian nationalists violently demonstrated against him. Many Bosniacs are not happy with the idea of cohabitation under the same roof with the Croats, but open opposition was marginal, partly for the estimates of a Muslim majority, but mainly for the general pro-unification Bosniac attitude in Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, most criticism of the unification originates from the sensation that the unified administration (today with a mayor of one nationality and a vice-mayor of the other one) and the unified police are structures imposed from above. These structures are still monitored and economically and politically dependant from outside help, and their progress towards unification follows a schedule which is not harmonized with the local society. As a matter of facts, the population in Mostar is supposed to accept the unification process in the same passive way as it was (and still is) forced to cope with the separation and the division of the town.

Everyone's land

[MAP – Mostar_4¹¹] The buildings of the unified police and city administrations are on the street *Ulica Adema Buća*. This street runs as a parallel to the east of the war frontline. The choice of *Ulica Adema Buća* was intended to facilitate access to people coming from both sides of the town, but it also symbolizes a central and equilibrated position of the new institutions. International governmental organizations (like the UNHCR e OSCE) also set their central offices in this street

¹¹ Map – Mostar_4: “*Everyone's Land*”: G = Gymnasium (*Gradska Gimnazija*), P = Police Central Station (*Policija*), U = Central Administration (*Uprava*), D.Z. (*Dom Zdravlja* - Daily Hospital).

(though, OSCE recently moved to a much bigger facilitation on another street close to the old frontline). In the same area is situated the Daily hospital, as well as some NGOs (like the and also the Italian COSPE which established there a local association for entrepreneurship and job, named LiNK¹²). The same logic of inviting people to interact in the city's only *no man's land* (or *everyone's land*) lays in the promotion of the City Gymnasium (*Gradska Gimnazija*), as a common place for Croatian and Bosniac students.

[PHOTO – Mostar_5¹³] The building of the gymnasium is itself a symbol of integration: built during the Austrian-Hungarian domination, it is a mixture of Mitteleuropean architecture and moresque style. It has been only partially restored after the war and the façade is still ruined, but the school has opened shortly after the war had ended. Initially the building hosted only a Croatian gymnasium, but from the school year 2003/04 the first half of the Muslim gymnasium moved to the building, followed by the rest of the classes in 2004/5. The two gymnasiums eventually unified under a single director, even if classes are still separate. One of the many International organizations which have been working in postwar Mostar, OSCE, has played a major role in the unification of the old city gymnasium, pushing towards an achievement that many considered (and consider) premature. Other critics regret the fact that the school has still separated classes, teachers, programs, and languages of education (officially Croatian and Bosnian). On the other hand, a clear sign of integration is

¹² LiNK is an Association for Entrepreneurship and Job that is allowing small credits to Mostar enterprisers of all nationalities and trying to build a web of people based on common economic interests (Interview with Amela Bećirović, LiNK executive director/*Izvršni direktor*, Mostar, April 2006) and Daria Antenucci (former Cospe coordinator in Mostar), Naples, March 2006. See: <http://www.linkmostar.org>; <http://www.cospe.it>; <http://www.ndcmostar.org>.

¹³ Photo: Mostar_5: *The City Gymnasium and the Spanish monument in Španjolski trg / Španski trg.*

shown by the fact that workshops, music band, sport teams and the student council are unified.¹⁴

Open spaces

Sport is typically a space of interaction but also of national symbolism, which means a source of both cohesion and conflict. In Contemporary Mostar there are two football (soccer) teams and two stadiums in which these teams play. In Yugoslav times, Velež (founded in 1922), was the Mostar only soccer team. Following the city division, Velež became the Bosniac team of Mostar and Zrinski, an old club shut down by the authorities during the Yugoslav regime, was founded again by the local Croatian authorities. Zrinski is presently using the city stadium situated in the west side of the town, where Velež was playing until the war. Velež is now playing in a little stadium in a far suburb. The “Bosniac” team uses red colors and has also a long tradition of being *leftist*, and its supporters portray symbols taken from the set of images of the radical and extremist imaginary (even from the 1970s Italian red terrorism). While Zrinski supporters insist on clearly nationalist symbols, Velež supporters (following the characteristic Bosniac ideological attitude) present themselves and the team as more tolerant, even though at the beginning of the 2000 decade there were more non-Croatian players in the Croatian teams than non-Bosniac players in the Bosniac team (Rolland 2004).

The derby between Velež and Zrinski is an occasion of expression of ideologically and nationally based symbols (fascist vs. communist and Croatian vs. Bosniac). Often the confrontation between the two soccer fans ends up in violent conflicts on the public streets of Mostar. Local and international media have

¹⁴ Interview with Richard Medic (former OSCE Spokesman in Mostar), Mostar, April 2006.

expressed concern for the violence erupting from the clashes between the fans. Still, there are no evidences that these clashes are more numerous or stronger than in other European towns and to us it seems that the choreographic confrontation is a more important part of the game than the violence itself. This means that the derby serves for freely expressing negative feelings towards one another, but also for a dialogue, albeit conflictual and lively.

The choreographic confrontation lasts in time longer than the occasional street violence, as it goes on in the *virtual* space, not only in the official sites of the two clubs or in independent sites made by the supporters, but also on websites. The main website which allows such public and open confrontation is *Bljesak*, a Mostar based magazine (*Bljesak.info*, *BH internet magazin*).¹⁵ This website magazine has the main function of a news collector and bulletin, but it also offers a special section of photo galleries where guests freely and daily add pictures of people and happenings in various places, mainly in Mostar. This collection of galleries of the *Bljesak* website, called *(Ne)obične slike običnih ljudi* (“(Un)common pictures of common people”), is an *open* and *public space* that people use as a mirror to show themselves, other people, situations, places, events, pieces of “outside” reality they like to put to the attention of others and that can be freely commented by anyone. The most visited pictures are from local strip-tease shows, followed by portraits taken on the streets of Mostar.¹⁶ Seemingly, many users and viewers are young people, appearing on the pictures of the many galleries and subgalleries in which is organized the website. Besides sex, most pictures and galleries concern sport (with pictures of fans or from from the local matches), night life and clubbing in Mostar, and concerts in town.

¹⁵ <http://www.bljesak.info>.

¹⁶ By the end of 2006 (12.12.2006) out of the sixteen most viewed pictures (with the minimum 16.907 visits) are pictures from strip-tease exhibitions.

Nightclubbing and coffee gathering by day are *open spaces* with a certain degree of confrontation and interaction which is not limited to people of the same ethnic/national group. Cafés do not offer as easy contacts as nightclubs, since the latter *open spaces* can be also considered places for music concerts. In the years 2000s Mostar hosted many concerts of singers coming from different parts of former Yugoslavia and of diverse nationalities and musical genres (such as the Serb *turbofolk* singer Seka Alekšić, the Serb songwriter Đorđe Balašević, the Montenegrin “Frank Zappa” Rambo Amadeus, the Croatian Alternative rock band Let 3 and the hard-core nationalist Croatian singer Thompson).

In the very recent years some concerts have been organized bearing in mind the whole urban community, like the New Year’s Eve concert. In December 2005, for the first time, a common New Year’s celebration has been organized, hosting local bands and the famous pop singer from Croatia Vesna Pisarović. In December 2006 the stage hosted the Mostar Sedvah Reunion, a local but internationally recognized Bosniac folk group. In both cases the main concert was opened by local young bands. Last April 2006, another common show was organized, to celebrate the band which was about to represent Bosnia-Herzegovina at the European Music Festival: Hari Mata Hari. The 2005 New Year’s celebration was not a success, maybe because of the rain, and few people attended the concert, almost essentially from the western side, while the April 2006 event attracted thousands of Mostarians, from the east but also from the west side.

The Spanish Square

The place used for the open concerts lies in the very center of the old military frontline, the so called “Spanish Square”. The Spanish Square can be easily reached

from both sides of the town and has not a particular national connotation. Before the war, this place was not a square, but rather an intersection, crossed by the teenagers promenade (*Korzo*), on which side the City Gymnasium is located. In front of the latter the big department store *Hit* was once situated, and a more recent huge building, which used to host a bank and was later intended to host some other offices (although this never happened). People referred to this site as “between Gymnasium and Hit”.

During the war all the buildings around the square were severely damaged. The Gymnasium was damaged and abandoned for several years, the Hit building was completely destroyed, and the building hosting the bank is still empty and in ruins. When the war ended, after the Dayton agreement, a Spanish patrol was set to guard the frontline. The Spanish army established a monument to remember the sacrifice of its soldiers who died in Mostar and vicinity. The monument was conceived and built by the Spanish army, without any formal decision by local authorities. The site informally acquired two names: *Španjolski trg* for the Croats and *Španski trg* for the Bosniacs. [PHOTO – Mostar_5¹⁷]

After the war, for quite a long time, the square remained a *non-place*, and clearly stood as a limit for the locals, who did not cross it. While all the sites in town clearly developed a national outlook, the *Spanish square* didn't acquire a national connotation. There was an attempt by Croats to monopolize the place. Right after the war, on the western side of the square, hard-line Croats opened a bar, with a Croatian flag and posters of Pope John Paul II and the Croatian President Tuđman. Today, these symbols are much less visible and the bar itself is less evident. The Spanish monument stands out still, as a big check-board does on the ground nearby, used especially by elders. A new bar (*Cocoloco*) opened on the same corner of the square

¹⁷ Photo: Mostar_5: *The City Gymnasium and the Spanish monument in Španjolski trg / Španski trg.*

towards the Croatian side, but this is a day and night meeting place for youngsters coming from both sides of the town (and many are students of the gymnasium), giving the impression that the *no man's land* is slowly spreading.

Widening the everyone's land

[MAP – Mostar_6¹⁸] The longest part of the war frontline was the *Bulevar Narodne revolucije* (“people’s revolution”), which for the Croats became *Bulevar Hrvatskih branitelja* (“Croatian defenders”) and for the Bosniacs simply *Bulevar*, as it was actually called in everyday conversations, and still is. On this street, severely destroyed during the war, there is also the Franciscan church, a mosque and, right close to the Spanish square, a small area reserved to the synagogue. Not far from the square, on the Croatian side, there is the roundabout square: since ever called informally *Rondo*, and whose official new name is *trg hrvatskih velikana* (square of the Croatian heroes). The *Rondo* lays on the Croatian side of the town and also hosts a renowned restaurant, a recently renewed café owned by a former Croatian mayor and the main Croatian National cultural center (*Matica Hrvatska*). The café is part of a building which hosts a new shopping mall. Even if people are aware that the shopping mall is owned by the new Croatian political and economic nationalist elite doesn’t stop Bosniacs to shop there in search of western brands (as Croats still go to the cheaper food Market in Eastern Mostar).

The Spanish square and the Rondo are connected with the old *Korzo*, which is no longer the teenager promenade that it was before the war. This street had the formal name of *Lenjinovo šetalište* (“Lenin's promenade”) and now is formally called *Ulica Zrinskog*, after the name of a famous medieval Croatian figure. On the left side

¹⁸ Map: Mostar_6: *Widing the “Everyone’s Land”*.

of the street there is the access to a small green area once known as the Lovers' park, which leans on the old *Liska* (now called *Ulica Humskog*), the parallel to Zrinskog also heading at the Rondo. During the first year of the conflict the little park became a cemetery where the victims of the Serbian bombings were buried. After the beginning of the Croatian-Muslim war, this was the only mixed war cemetery in Mostar. The civic communist tradition of burying with no religious symbols was already awakened in the last years of Yugoslavia, but during and right after the war the separation of the tombs and of the cemeteries became more and more evident. In the last years, many tombs have been removed from this last common cemetery following pressures from Serbian and Croatian political leaders, and religious authorities. Nevertheless, some families kept their dear ones there, so it still hosts tombs of all three religious and national affiliations. Even if this is not the specific intention of the families of the dead, this way they contributed to the maintenance of a common space of exchange and interaction, and mourn.

The survival of the common cemetery in the old Lovers' park is one of the elements of the forces that counterbalance separation and isolation. From a physical and territorial point of view, the thick border between the Croatian and Bosniac zones is getting softer and the no mans' land is widening towards the river on the east, and towards the Rondo on the west. Between the territorial signs of integration we can see: on the *Korzo*, the new site of OSCE, and on the eastern limit, right on the street *Aleksa Šantića*, the youth cultural center *Abrašević*, whose policy is openly pointed towards integration and cooperation between all nationalities.

Another territorial and visible sign of the reshaping of the *no man's* (and *everybody's*) land are the *osmrtnice*. These are obituaries that are usually put on the street walls by relatives of the dead. The *osmrtnice* are different according to the

religion of the dead: Muslim *osmrtnice* are green and white, while the Catholic and Orthodox ones are black and white, but the former are written in Latin alphabet and the latter in Cyrillic alphabet. Along the religious ones, it is not so rare to see laic *osmrtnice* for partisans, in black and white and latin alphabet. These announcements are territorial marks and at a first glance it might seem that they simply confirm the division of the city, as the green color is strongly dominant on the eastern side of the town and the black one on the western side. These dead announcements are stuck on special boards near the place of cult, but younger members of the dead man's family generally stick them also on city walls, bus stops, light poles. According to the zones where the dead lived and where are supposed to live friends, colleagues and relatives of the dead build a mental map of the town, choosing the places according to a communitarian *sense of the space*¹⁹. Near the places of cult and deep inside the streets of the *two Mostars* there are solely either Catholic or Islamic obituaries. Still, it is not rare to find black *osmrtnice* in the two main and central roads of East Mostar and West Mostar: on the Western *Avenija*²⁰ and the eastern *Ulica Maršala Tita*". Orthodox and laic (and presumably also Jewish) *osmrtnice* contribute to the complexity of the picture, but the religious (and social) dominance of the two main (and still competing) confessions in town is indisputable. What is interesting is that a most variegated picture of *osmrtnice* can be noticed in the main roads and approaching to this slowly expanding no man's land. Catholic *osmrtnice* are visible on the pillars and walls on both sides of the bridges of East Mostar, where they look like black and white points surrounded by green and white colors, and Islamic ones are present in the Rondo, where dominance is Catholic. The growth of the "outside" presences show that the freedom of movement has enhanced, and that "communitarian borders" are not thick

¹⁹ Stephanie Roland has analyzed the mental maps of Mostar young inhabitants (Rolland 2005).

²⁰ *Avenija 14 Februar* changed its name into *Avenija Kralja Tomislava* (after the first Croatian King Tomislav), but, as in Yugoslav times, it is still simply called *Avenija*.

as one might think, or that the communities in Mostar cannot be simply identified merely with the Croatian and the Bosniac one.

The *osmrtnice* help to define the spaces, and are a sign of the strength of the division in town. Nevertheless, they also show the existence of trend towards mutual tolerance and towards freedom of movement, and signify also that borders are shaping themselves so to enlarge the area of a whole inter-religious city community. Another sign of this trend towards interaction is given also by monuments. If the old monuments, following the ideological repositioning, have been nationalized (even those that did not have any original national connotation, like the socialist symbols), new monuments have appeared in 2005 and 2006, with the precise intention to demystify and denationalize the space. In April 2006, on the last week of his staying in Mostar, the Australian OSCE spokesperson Richard Medic, with a little ceremony followed by local media, donated to the town a tree, which was planted in the city park. Medic was looking for a “monument” without national connotation and trees have not been nationalized yet.²¹ But what also reveals the intention to mark the territory with a tree as a demystifying and anti-nationalist physical element is the place he chose for the tree.

The choice of a place for a monument is decisive for its function in the years to come. Under their military and political control during and after the war, local Croatian religious and political authorities decided to build a huge cross on the hill right above the town, so that everyone would notice it. Likewise, on the near by mountain (on the other side of the valley) the big white writing *Tito mi volimo te* (“Tito we love you”) has been changed into *BiH mi volimo te* (“Bosnia-Herzegovina we love you”). Higher church towers and higher minarets participate to the rush for

²¹ Interview with Richard Medic (Former OSCE Spokeman in Mostar), Mostar, April 2006.

the nationalization of the visual space. The monuments and plates posed by the Yugoslavian -monarchic and socialist- authorities were often in central and important squares, to be seen by everyone, following the basic patterns of the classic space for the monuments in the European great phase of nationalization, from the middle of 19th century to the middle of the 20th century. In the second and last part of the 20th century European celebrative monuments started to be smaller and in less “important” streets, but main streets and squares were still the priority choice, as were parks (also according to the European standard of organization of the space in urban gardens and parks). The park that hosts the *Australian tree* is officially named after the Croatian hero Zrinski, but it is normally called City park (*Gradski park*), as the already mentioned street on its right side (the *Korzo*, officially *Ulica Zrinskog*).

The park follows the *Korzo/Zrinskog* from Spanish square all the way to the Rondo, therefore it is in the Croatian side of the town, but very close to the Spanish square, the gymnasium and the club Cocoloco, that is also in the expanding *everybody's land*, albeit not in its center. Richard Medic chose the city park as a strong element of the widening of the *everyone's land*, since this site already hosted another provocative, demystifying and a-national (and anti-nationalist) monument: the statue of Bruce Lee.

Bruce Lee, tvoj Mostar

When the *Korzo* was the local promenade (as opposed to the more tourist walk near by the Old bridge), the city park was very much visited. In the late 1990s, as it was not far from the frontline, and at the eastern end of West Mostar, it became more marginal and, often visited by drunkards and usually only crossed by western Mostarians. Here the Bruce Lee monument has been erected, thought to be a new

symbol of the town, as absurd as it might seem. In such a divided city, it is a comprehensible paradox chosen as a figure with no links whatsoever with the place, so that it would serve as a common symbol. For the promoters of the monument, Bruce Lee is to symbolize a generational (and highly gendered) unified memory and an ironic challenge to the ethnic and national race for territorial (material and symbolic) occupation in Mostar and Bosnia and Herzegovina and to the competing views of justice and memory dominating in town. [PHOTO – Mostar 7²²]

It was not easy for the promoters to get the space to establish the monument, intended to be in the Spanish square. Here the symbolic meaning of the monument would underline its relatedness to the symbolic value of the square as a meeting and integrative space. But in the city park Bruce Lee is mainly contributing to the expanding of the everyone's land and even pushing some tourists to visit this park, given the high publicity that international and national press have dedicated to the opening of the Bruce Lee monument. The international and national media coverage has not been comparable to the attention given to the opening of the Old bridge. However, the media have registered the many phases of the monument: from the first press conference in 2004, in which the promoters (*Urbani pokret Mostar*, "Urban Movement Mostar"), announced its intention to establish such monument, to its establishment in late 2005.

The monument has been criticized before its establishment and started to be vandalized from the first night after the opening. Criticism expresses doubt on a symbol which is not local. Bruce Lee was not a local hero or a local writer. Kids raised in the 1970s would probably oppose this view as for them, now grownups, he was a hero. He was not a Mostar hero, but they felt him closer to them than the old

²² Photo: Mostar_7: Bruce Lee: work in progress („the fight is not over yet”).

partisan heroes, nor to the ancient, and not yet reassessed myths of Prince Lazar or King Tomislav. He was a global myth with no relations to the local environment, but the shared memory of a child's age (like the mythical golden age of nationalists?) in a common state where the urban interaction in Mostar was not strongly limited by physical or *apparent* borders. In an open contestation with the view of constant territorial marking by the two dominant communities in competition for the control of the urban space, *Urbani pokret Mostar* intended to be provocative and to raise problems to the established view of a divided town. In such symbolically divided town, only an outside symbol could escape the logic of national symbolic appropriation or negation. Any other figure from Mostar past could be exploited and politically used by one or the other side. Localizing a global symbol seemed the only alternative to nationalist ideological over-interpretations.

The attention devoted to the Bruce Lee monument and the positive and negative reactions (more of the latter maybe than of the former) testify the symbolic power of the monument. Openly and publicly expressed criticisms, and also vandalisms, have a political meaning. It is doubtful whether the latter follow a strategy which opposes integration, or they are simply the polemical act of some hooligans. At the same time, the monument has been also defended by young and old Mostarians, with different degrees of political interpretations of the reality. Some of the people present at the official openings were there just for fun or because they were moderately curious, others because they shared the ideas of the *Urbani pokret Mostar*. These reasons moved Mostarians and tourists to visit the statue in the following months, contributing to the widening of Mostar's open space.

Conclusion

In our research we are taking into account the material and symbolical occupation of the public space. We are focusing our analysis on the competing views and competing forces of separation and integration in the postwar Mostar public space. This means primarily to look at the developments and changes of the urban space and at the perception of these changes by the local inhabitants. Our analysis shows that both tendencies towards integration and those towards separation are active and strong. The trend toward separation has been dominant in these postwar years, but elements of an opposite integrative trend have been growing. The frontline was the most destroyed part of the town, and it carries symbols of conflict and non-communication. At the same time, Spanish square, the center of the frontline, is apparently acquiring the role of a meeting place, a common space built on its national vacuum, which is widening (physically and symbolically), thanks to spontaneous initiatives, such as the Bruce Lee monument, the concerts organized for the town, or the internationally coordinated projects (such as the gymnasium). The movement towards integration is still very weak opposed to the still going movements towards the maintenance and enhancement of separation, but it is a recognizable movement in town. Nevertheless, the fragility of this process is self-evident starting from the two different names which are used for the square (*Španjolski/Španski trg*), a challenge to its unitary essence.

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