

# Balkan Intricacies

By Jippe Witteveen, October 4, 2024

Cycling through the Balkans, I got a taste of how diverse - and complicated - this region is. This seems to be both a blessing and a curse. Having spent time in the Balkans and talking to many people, I've learned more about some of the intricacies. At the same time, I realised that one can spend a lifetime studying this region. To fully grasp how the different countries, territories and peoples relate to each other is a very difficult, if not impossible task. In this article I will highlight some of the experiences that I've had that struck me as underscoring the region's complexity. I would like to emphasise that these are just some encounters that I thought were telling, coupled with some basic knowledge about the Balkans. I have not done additional research.



*The route I cycled through the former Yugoslavia.*

The Balkan region is home to a mix of ethnicities, nationalities and religions. This

is true across state borders: many of the present-day states in the Balkans have large minority groups that would rather be part of a different country. This is very apparent in the Western Balkans, which for most of the 20th century was unified as one country: Yugoslavia. After the Second World War, Yugoslavia as a state was underpinned by the ideology of communism. Social class is the leading principle in communist societies, not nationality. Especially under the rule of Josip Broz Tito, Yugoslavia was held together in this way. The Yugoslavian history is idealised by many people in the countries I cycled through, and Tito tends to be looked upon very favourably.

Starting in the early 1990s, however, Yugoslavia started to fall apart. Some of the Yugoslavian republics, such as Slovenia, managed to leave the federation relatively unscathed. In others, Bosnia and Herzegovina being a prime example, war ensued. The legacies of these wars are still being felt today.

In Tuzla in Bosnia, outside the supermarket, I met Elmir. He was curious about my bike and started talking to me. I was not planning to cycle far that day and Elmir had a day off, so we decided to hang out for the day. He showed me around the city. "Look, here we have a mosque, over there you can see a catholic church, and if you look that way you can see an orthodox church. This is the beauty of Bosnia." "This diversity is amazing indeed," I replied, "but it has in the past also led to great tragedy, right?" "It's the leaders who spread hate and cause suffering, not the people," Elmir replied. "In Bosnia, different peoples have lived among each

other peacefully for hundreds of years.” He was not wrong.

I told Elmir that I was interested to learn a little bit more about the war in Bosnia. He was eager to tell me about it, but wanted to find a place with wifi so he could use a translator. His English was not bad, but about this topic he did not want to be misunderstood. He wanted to carefully and precisely be able to choose his words. First, though, he took me to the place in the city centre where a grenade was shot into a crowd of people one dreadful evening in May 1995. 71 people died, mostly youngsters who were drinking coffee and tea at the many little cafes. One of them was Elmir’s friend Elvis, who was 14 years old. Later that afternoon Elmir took me to Elvis’ grave.



*From the 1984 Winter Olympics, with bullet holes.*

When we had found wifi, Elmir told me about the war. He was 13 when it started in 1992. It had been so unexpected; until this point the Bosnians had seen the Serbs as brothers. “But they had planned it out. The Yugoslav army was in their hands.” At first the Bosnians barely had any weapons, and used whatever they could find to defend their neighbourhoods. When later on in the war the Bosnians were on the winning hand, Elmir explained, the United

States at some point drew a line and did not let them push on further. To this day Bosnia is divided into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Republika Srpska. The former is mainly populated by ethnic Bosniaks and Croats, the latter by ethnic Serbs.

Within the former Yugoslavia, I got the feeling that most other nationalities see Serbia as the bad guy. And although wars are rarely black and white it must be acknowledged that Serbia, under the aggressive nationalistic rule of Slobodan Milosević, started the violence. It was also Serbia that committed genocide in Srebrenica. Multiple people in Bosnia have told me that what stings the most nowadays, is that Serbia won’t acknowledge the war crimes. To the contrary, it celebrates some of the war criminals as national heroes. This is a great obstacle for reconciliation.

Perhaps I should’ve talked to more Serbs to get a better understanding of their point of view. But one does get the feeling that they feel misrepresented and misunderstood. It is true that many Serbs, the largest ethnic group of the Western Balkans, live outside of Serbia in the other former Yugoslavian states. They therefore live under governments that might not share the interests of the Serbian people. One evening when I got stuck in a thunder storm on a mountain in eastern Montenegro together with my travel buddy Niels, we ended up staying the night with a Serbian family at their mountain hut. When at some point I recorded a video and said “we are here in Montenegro...” they shouted “SRBIA! SRBIA!” Only one of the twelve or so people there spoke some English; two of the other women took

turns speaking through google translate, and with the men we shared universal slaps on the back, hand gestures, and shots of rakija (a homemade liquor which is common across the Balkan region). The young girls seemed to have a much better understanding of what was being said, but were too shy to speak.

They said that under the former Montenegrin government, many ethnic Montenegrins had been encouraged to move to this region. Judging by the amount of Serbian flags I had seen in northern and eastern Montenegro, it seemed to me that this region was predominantly populated by Serbs. Mika, who was the most outspoken to us, using google translate, told us that she thought the former prime minister should be imprisoned for resettling Montenegrins in the area. Talking about Kosovo, which was our objective for the next day (we had in fact been planning to reach Kosovo that evening already, but we had ended up at a hiking trail that was way too steep, and then also got stuck in the storm), they told us that crazy people were living there. "We consider it to be our land."

The next day, in the pouring rain, we finally did make it over the mountain into Kosovo, using a different route. This was a road that had been in use during Yugoslavian times, but had been closed during the Kosovo war in 1999. We had been told by some that it was possible to cross the border by bicycle - we kept receiving contradictory information - and in the end it turned out to indeed be possible, be it technically illegally.

To us, of course, the people in Kosovo were not crazy at all. Kosovo Albanians,

who make up the largest ethnic group in Kosovo, were very friendly and curious. Just like in other parts of the Western Balkans (except in Serbia, where people seem to mind their own business more) many people wanted to talk to us. Usually in German, by the way. Since the wars of the '90s, many people from the Western Balkans have lived in Germany. Speaking German you will get around much more easily than speaking English.

Upon entering Kosovo, we had a 12 kilometre downhill through the absolutely breathtaking Rugova gorge. I had never entered a country in such a spectacular way, and it was an especially sweet reward after the struggle of trying to reach Kosovo over the two previous days. The gorge is named after Ibrahim Rugova, who was the first president of the self-proclaimed Republic of Kosovo and who advocated non-violent resistance to Serbian rule. All over Kosovo there are statues of him, and his image looms large on the sides of concrete, socialist-style apartment blocks.

Another person you often come across in this way is former US-president Bill Clinton. Kosovo basically thanks its independence to intervention by NATO, and its love for the US and the EU is very clear by the amount of symbols, flags and Western institutions. Entering the city of Pejë, which lies at the foot of the mountains and the Rugova Gorge, was like entering an American town. It had just gotten dark, but the streets were shining bright by the abundance of lit-up billboards. In a way the whole country had a bit of an artificial feel to it, as it so heavily dependent on Western protection and investment. This is a stark contrast compared to Serbia, which does not have a

good relationship with the West and is instead more in Russia's orbit, coupled with a growing Chinese influence.

In Kosovo there is also an abundance of memorials, graveyards, flags and other symbols dedicated to the UÇK (the *Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës*, or Kosovo Liberation Army). This was the other faction, which unlike Rugova used violence to reach its objective of an independent Kosovo. The symbol of the UÇK very much resembles the Albanian flag, depicting the two-headed eagle on a red background. Albania, which has never been part of Yugoslavia, is certainly Kosovo's closest friend and supporter number one. This is of course not surprising considering the similarity of the people. The Albanian language is the dominant language in Kosovo, for example, and is completely different from Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian and Montenegrin, which are very similar to each other.



*Bill Clinton on an apartment block in Pristina.*

North Macedonia's relationship with Albania is more complicated, as I was to find out. Soon after crossing the border into this country - which officially added 'north' to its name a few years ago after a longtime dispute with Greece over the

name - I found an Albanian flag at the side of the road. I was not aware of any issues between North Macedonia and Albania, and attached the flag to the back of my bicycle. The next day, when Niels and I got lost in a deserted industrial area with aggressive guard dogs, we ran into a guy with dreadlocks who explained to us how to get out. His friendly facial expression quickly soured when he noticed the flag. "This is a problem," he remarked, before ripping the flag off the bike and throwing it between the littered bushes at the side of the road. Niels got quite pissed off by this and lectured the man about not touching someone else's property. The man in turn remarked that we did not know how evil Albanians were and that we had not lived through war. Suddenly the situation was quite tense, and so we decided to leave. We took the flag but did not put it on the bike again. I realised by this point that there was more to the Macedonian-Albanian relations than I had been aware of.

Later that day, however, we rode through a town where we saw nothing but Albanian flags. Every second passing car seemed to be waving the two-headed eagle. Ethnic Albanians make up a fifth to a quarter of North Macedonia's population, and live largely segregated from their ethnic Macedonian countrymen. Niels picked up on the mood and started waving the Albanian flag as well. A fifteen year old boy on an electric scooter passed by and excitedly crossed his hands, spreading his fingers. This represents the Albanian two-headed eagle. (Just like the thumb, index finger and middle finger together represent Serbia and its three-coloured flag.) We were on a hill, and the boy pointed down to the town in the valley to



show us where his house was. “There, close to the mosque, behind the pink house.” He spoke just enough English to explain to us that he normally lives and goes to school in Tirana, Albania’s capital, and only spends the summers here in the town where he grew up.

The day before reaching the Bulgarian border, which also meant returning to the European Union, we met two guys at the gas station just outside the town of Kriva Palanka. Their names were Damian and Naum, they were both 17 years old. We decided to hang out with them for the evening. Damian took us to the sports field - the facilities looked quite new and had been financed by Bulgaria - as it was the place he usually came to hang out. Naum joined us after he finished his work at the gas station. Damian was a cool guy at first. When we talked about the economic situation in North Macedonia, I liked his remark that “every country offers some opportunities. You just have to find the opportunities in your country.” It was a bit unfortunate to find out that the opportunity he had found was to smuggle and sell drugs. “If I count Kosovo, then North Macedonia borders five countries. We have a pretty central position.”

Damian had a Serbian father and a Macedonian mother. Although he lives in North Macedonia, he identifies more with Serbia. He also believed that this part of northeastern North Macedonia should actually be part of Serbia. He said that most people there are Serbs, although a quick google search about the Kriva Palanka municipality contradicts that claim. He did not seem to have much of a problem with North Macedonia, however. He seemed to be fascinated by their

‘special forces.’ His problem was with Albania. He intensely hated that country and its people. His personal experience played a role here. Albanian insurgents made some incursions into North Macedonia in the early 2000s. His father was a soldier and had to defend the homeland. Now he is a traumatised man who just sits at home and drinks alcohol.

I got the feeling that Damian was not very well educated. He turned out to be very racist, and did not realise that his argumentation did not make any sense. He said that the Japanese had been evil during World War Two because of their treatment of women and children, but could not think of anything that the Nazis had done wrong. “I admire how systematically they operated. Also the German technology... I want to kill Albanians with German weapons.” Interestingly, Naum seemed to be the polar opposite of Damian. He was the kind of person that just wanted to be left in peace, and therefore also left others in peace. “We are all just people.” I thought it was striking that they were friends. Back home I could hardly imagine people with such different views to be friends. Maybe there just were not so many 17 year olds in Kriva Palanka to be friends with. I hope Damian will learn from Naum.

The Western Balkans are a region of great diversity and complexity. This can be an asset, or it can be a liability. Elmir was of the opinion that politics has spread hate and distrust, and ordinary people just want to live in peace. I think there’s truth to that. Intolerant political concepts such as radical nationalism have in the past made neighbours into enemies. Politicians can use populism to mobilise populations,

even if this is not in the common interest. This is something that is currently also happening in other parts of Europe and far beyond, and we need to take this very seriously.

I think that education is key for the Western Balkans (and not only that region) to have a bright future. Damian's personal experience was tragic, but he did not understand that his reaction to it only perpetuates a never-ending cycle of hate. It does not solve any problem, but rather only creates more. Simply knowing that something tragic has happened to your country in history might evoke a very human urge for retribution. When studying history more in depth, one starts to see the pattern. By understanding the pattern of history we can start to see which policies might have a positive effect on the future, and which might have a negative effect. If many people think like Damian, the Western Balkan's diversity will be a grave liability. If many think like Naum or Elmir, this might be a great asset and the region will have a bright future.