

Signs by the Roadside

Nikola Bradonjic

Abstract

There are some stories that a city can tell better than its people. They are hidden in urban scenes, signs, and symbols; in messages on the walls, sculptures, architecture, and cultural landscape.

Kosovo, once part of Serbia and thus Yugoslavia, proclaimed itself an independent state in 2008. Its main city and capital is Pristina. Centrally located on the Balkan Peninsula, in Southeastern Europe, Kosovo remains a disputed territory due to its mixed population: Serbs and Albanians. Tensions between the two groups have resulted in ethnic divisions, culminating in the Kosovo War of 1998-99 and NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999.

Our 3-phase, large, collaborative, tri-lingual project took place in Pristina in 2010, a decade after the war and bombings. It was organized by two cultural, non-governmental organizations: one from Serbia and one from Kosovo. My job was to take documentary photos in Pristina and Gracanica, another city in Kosovo. These photos were to accompany the interviews of the locals that other artists recorded. I tried to find the similarities and differences between Kosovo and my hometown, Novi Sad, which is in the Northern part of Serbia; and also between the two major ethnic groups of Kosovo: Serbians and Albanians.

I found that the people of Kosovo, regardless of their ethnicity, suffered from post-conflict residues, poor living conditions, and a corrupt government. Criminal activities and abuse of human rights were evident on "both" sides. Kosovo appeared like a big black hole locked in time, filled with intolerance, with an uncertain future (though on the EU track). And yet, it was full of rich history and beautiful nature. Its Medieval Monuments—Orthodox monasteries—are unique and on UNESCO's World Heritage List and List of World Heritage in Danger.

Fifteen of these photographs were shown in the exhibit "Views: Personal Histories of Serbs and Albanians." They were exhibited as large prints (1 m x 2 m) together with recorded interviews, in the Museum of Contemporary Art of Vojvodina and in The Multimedia Center of Pristina. Later, they were part of "Patriotic Hypermarket," a theater performance, which played in The "Bitef" Theater in Belgrade, and then went on tour in the ex-Yugoslav countries. Fig. 1 through Fig. 10 represent some of the exhibition photographs.



Fig. 1. Sometimes signs can tell stories better than people...A road sign in the outskirts of Pristina. July 2010. Photo credit: Nikola Bradonjic.



Fig. 2. Post-conflict traces remain in the urban landscape, speaking of a multi-ethnic population. A Serbian Orthodox Monastery (built in 1321), Gracanica: on UNESCO's World Heritage List. July 2010. Photo credit: Nikola Bradonjic.



Fig. 3. Pristina, the capital city of Kosovo, was once part of Serbia, but then the Civil War broke out and divided not only the people who once lived happily as neighbors but also the places that they used to share together: the road, the sidewalk, the bench, the store, the bank...An unfinished Serbian Orthodox Church in downtown Pristina. July 2010. Photo credit: Nikola Bradonjic.



Fig. 4. Hidden in billboards, architecture, or public art, signs tell stories of a divided city. A monument from a post conflict period in downtown Pristina. July 2010. Photo credit: Nikola Bradonjic.



Fig. 5. Money ru(i)ns everything. ProCredit Bank: cheap loans. Pristina. July 2010. Photo credit: Nikola Bradonjic.



Fig. 6. Chaos, not only in diplomatic relations, but as an everyday reality...A street scene from a neighborhood in Pristina. July 2010. Photo credit: Nikola Bradonjic.



Fig. 7. Caught between its differences and similarities, the multi-ethnic population is trying to patch its colorful, peaceful coexistence back together...Between spectacle and resistance: Billboards: Snoop Dogg concert in Pristina; KFOR "in the service of peace and progress." July 2010. Photo credit: Nikola Bradonjic.



Fig. 8. The storefront of a framing shop in downtown Pristina. July 2010. Photo credit: Nikola Bradonjic.



Fig. 9. A wedding dress store in downtown Pristina. July 2010. Photo credit: Nikola Bradonjic.



Fig. 10. Pristina horizon. July 2010. Photo credit: Nikola Bradonjic.

About the author

Nikola Bradonjic is a graphic designer and photographer currently based in New York. He was the onsite photographer of the Serbian National Theater in Novi Sad.

Email: nikola.bradonjic@gmail.com