

Spring: season of hope

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It is nearly Spring in Belgrade; a relief from the drabness and gloom of the Balkan winter. The people in this city of two and a half million are emerging from their grey and brown winter clothes into some defiant colours, to greet the sunshine and to match the blossoms.

The Danube and Sava rivers are growing from this year's meagre snows that have melted in Austria, Croatia and Hungary. The first luxury cruise ships of the season will soon be tied up alongside one another in the port. Elderly American tourists walking the cobbled streets, clutching their five-year-old guide books, listening just possibly for the sound of distant gunfire, before quickly scampering back to the luxury of the familiar cruise ship cuisine, and cabins separated from the real world by glass and piped music.

In Belgrade thoughts are turning to the small pleasures that the season will bring to this city, still linked closely to its rural hinterland by abundant farmers' markets. More regular visits to family and friends in the country will be taken, visits that are usually just too difficult in the ice and snow of the winter, but bring with them a bounty of fruit, vegetables, and plum brandy in more clement times.

But it is also, alas, in this warming season that the costs of the wars of the 1990s can be the hardest to bear for ordinary people. For the middle classes, the professionals, the bureaucrats, and even the man in the street old enough to remember, summers in the old Yugoslavia meant a choice of holiday on the coast of Croatia or on one of its thousand islands, or in the



mountains of Slovenia, or, for the more adventurous, a touring holiday in a Zastava or Fiat in Austria or Germany or in Italy, where the Yugoslav passport was welcome, its holders generally respected, even admired.

Today the standard of living is still such that less than one in ten residents of Belgrade takes any kind of holiday away from home. Many of those who do travel are limited to the overcrowded and unwelcoming Montenegrin coast, or to taking cheap package tours to the less attractive parts of Greece or Tunisia. Most visas are difficult and time-consuming to obtain; even the young are faced with hours waiting in the street, high fees and uncertain response, in order to obtain a visa to study

or to stay with a family in the Schengen area and beyond. Perhaps most disorienting, to young and old alike, is the international stigma that now seems to be attached to simply being a Serb. Victors have written the history of the last ten years and, notwithstanding the intricate truths behind the wars, the Serbs have been painted with a broad brush, identified with the deeds undertaken by amoral and self-aggrandizing post-communist strongmen and criminal opportunists. There is no easy

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way to alter the prejudice faced by Serbs for actions taken in their name by this epic destructive minority. With a sad irony, the deep psychological frustrations still make much of the population susceptible to the nationalist cant being peddled as proud defiance by the tired remnants of an old regime.

Having been lied to comprehensively for an extended period, they now play host to half a million displaced and despairing who retreated from the lost wars, many of whom still have no access to their own property in the newly respectable, but vindictive, Croatia and elsewhere, let alone some great Serbian state or a reborn Yugoslavia. The psychological defeats are harder to exorcise from memory than the battlefield ones. It is against this background that the future of Serbia will be decided during the coming months. There is likely to be real political turbulence ahead, the Kosovo dénouement and the ensuing battle to claim Serbia's soul will be the last and perhaps the most hazardous battle of all.

Exhaustion may yet turn again into a sudden outburst of rage: one thing that many different, but ordinary, Serbs say is that, having been in this tunnel now for what seems like so long, they simply can't believe that they don't yet see signs of the light at the end of it.

So it is that when dealing with Serbia, whether in the Palaces of Vienna, or in Belgrade or even in Pristina, it is wise to remember the complex nature of just being a Serb in 2007 and the complexity of the constituency represented by those who speak for Serbia at this time. They should be heeded with more respect than they currently seem to attract for they will continue to carry the burden of responsibility for this period of Serb history when the rest of us have moved on.