GEOPOLITICS, REGIONAL COOPERATION AND SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY

Europe is born again or dies in the Balkans

The Catalans' ties of solidarity with the peoples of the former Yugoslavia and south-east Europe

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Inauguration of the Embassy of Local Democracy in Sarajevo. The event was attended by the Mayor of Barcelona, Pasqual Maragall, among other authorities. March 13, 1996. Photogragpy by Arxiu Fotogràfic de Barcelona. Unknown author.

Hundreds of eyes follow with excitement, admiration and anguish as a young child, known as that "enxaneta" of the Minyons de Terrassa human tower group climbs up to crown such a tower in the middle of Trg Barcelona square, in Mojmilo, the former Olympic village of the unforgettable Sarajevo '84 Games. Behind the solid human tower, a Gaudí dragon with the message "Barcelona, Sarajevo is with you" is painted along the entire side façade. This graffiti, projected the day after the terrible jihadist attack on the Ramblas in Barcelona on 17 August 2017, was how residents of Mojmilo gave back to the Catalan capital the three decades of solidarity shown by our society during and after the siege, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

Until the 1980s and 1990s, the Catalan imaginary of the Balkans was that of a distant, friendly, yet unknown land, a chessboard for the great powers since the assassination in Sarajevo (1914). It was seen as a crossroads of cultural and religious influences, a meeting point of East and West and a post-Cold War laboratory. Its regimes were as antagonistic as

the dictatorship of the colonels in Greece and Marshal Tito’s third way in Yugoslavia, capable of flirting with the Allies, the Soviets and non-aligned countries, as well as with Hollywood stars such as Liz Taylor, Richard Burton and Sophia Loren on the Adriatic island paradise of Brijuni. But in Catalonia, Tito also personifies the memory of the 1,700 Yugoslav volunteers who enlisted in the International Brigades to fight alongside the troops of the Second Republic in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). As part of the Đuro Đaković battalion, they played an important role in the defence of Madrid and the Aragon front, especially in the Battle of the Ebre.



The Minyons de Terrassa erect a human tower in Trg Barcelona square in Mojmilo, August 2017, in the former Olympic village of Sarajevo 84, rebuilt by Barcelona in 1999. Photography by Eric Hauck

The atrocities committed in the 14th century by the mercenaries of the Catalan Company in the East to drive the Ottomans out of Hellenic lands, under the orders of Roger de Flor and in the service of Emperor Andronicus II, were a long time ago. A deliberate paradox: what our legends describe as the heroics of the Almogavar soldiers, with their cry of “Awake, iron!”, have reached the present day in countries like Albania as the worst monstrosities, while the *Katallani* is a terrifying bogeyman who punishes children who do not behave. Indeed, for the same reason (looting by the Almogavars) we Catalans have been personae non gratae in Greek monasteries for almost seven centuries!

Catalonia, restored in Greece

The symbolic atonement for those events did not take place until 2005, when the minister Joaquim Nadal (prompted by the decisive efforts of the Empordà singer-songwriter from L’Escala Josep Tero and the secretary-general of the Presidency of Jordi Pujol’s last government, the poet Carlos Duarte) was invited to inaugurate the restoration of the tower that guards the ancient Byzantine treasure in the monastery of Vatopeni [1] on Mount Athos. The work, which cost the Generalitat 240,000 euros, and the gesture had a profound impact in Greece and also helped to restore Catalonia’s image in the region.

But perhaps it is sport that has most helped build a feeling of camaraderie and understanding between Catalans and Balkans, whether as athletes in our teams or those we admired, or even hated, as rivals. Yugoslavian sport —especially football, basketball, handball and water polo— has given us unforgettable names in our epic victories in recent decades, names such as Mijatović, Kodro, Prosinecki, Pantić, Delibasić, Petrović, Pešić, Vujović and Rudić, along with other Balkans, such as Bulgaria’s Stoichkov, Romania’s Hagi and the Greeks Papanikolaou and Calathes, to name just a few of the most formidable.

However, it was not until the Olympic Games in Sarajevo, 70 years after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, that the heart of the Balkans, Yugoslavia and Bosnia and Herzegovina definitively opened up to the world, just as Barcelona would do eight years later. The two Olympic Games, the 1984 Winter Games and the 1992 Summer Games, are still remembered today as the best in history, or as the ones that changed the disastrous cycle of ruinous and boycott-ridden Olympic Games.

When the East German Katarina Witt and the British Torvill and Dean with their Bolero by Ravel wowed the Olympics in Sarajevo (the first Cold War Olympics with Soviet and American presence after the boycotts in Moscow and Los Angeles) no one could have imagined how the world would change before the 1992 Olympics.

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The death of the South Slav unifier Tito (1980), along with the seemingly joyous fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), which brought an end to the Cold War, the demise of the Warsaw Pact, the fall of communist regimes, the reunification of Germany, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union (1991) took up too much the focus for Brussels to measure the impact of the collision between ultra-nationalist hegemonic plans in Serbia and Croatia amidst the birth of 22 new states in Europe. With a fragile, leaderless collegiate presidency, a suffocating economic crisis, and an overstretched, headless People's Army (the JNA), the third largest in Europe, threatened with dissolution and loss of privileges, it was impossible for Yugoslavia to withstand the division fuelled by hate-filled rhetoric, aimed at stoking a hitherto non-existent ethnic confrontation.

Olympic friendship

The secession of Slovenia and Croatia declared in 1991 and the arrival of the first images of war on European soil since 1945, just a two-hour flight away from Barcelona, triggered the solidarity of Catalan civil society, which sent aid to the refugee camps. Meanwhile, the bombing of Dubrovnik, the pearl of the Adriatic —a postcard many Catalans have etched in their memory— and the emergence of a new war crime, ethnic cleansing, after the destruction of Vukovar and the deportations to Slavonia and Krajina, added a new dimension to the conflict. This culminated in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the sieges of Sarajevo (1992-1996) and the fall of the supposedly UN-protected safe zones (1993-1995): Goražde, Srebrenica, Žepa, Tuzla and Bihać.

As images of civilian massacres, concentration camps, the systematic rape of women and girls, mass displacement of populations and culturicide intensified in the media, the war became increasingly unbearable in the eyes of the Catalans, who were used to mobilising their powerful network of associations in times of emergency. Institutions also stepped up: from the outset, Barcelona City Council led the efforts of the local communities, assisted by a Citizens' Committee for Solidarity with Sarajevo, coordinated by the councillor Eulàlia Vintró.

Two moments at the beginning of the siege of the Bosnian capital intensified this solidarity to unprecedented levels and, above all, made many Catalans feel that this was their war as well: on 17 May 1992, six weeks after the start of the siege, the death of the Catalan photojournalist Jordi Pujol Puente, while working for the Catalan *Avui* newspaper and the prestigious American agency Associated Press, shook the front pages. He was the first foreign reporter to fall under the bombs of Serb radicals. And like him, a further 155 journalists were killed in their attempts to explain the truth of a war in which 90% of the victims were not soldiers. [2] The second historic event was the heroic participation of Bosnia and Herzegovina's first Olympic team in the Barcelona Games (25 July – 9 August 1992). One particularly emotive memory is the heroic story of the athlete Mirsada Burić, who, after months of training among the rubble, bombs and snipers of Sarajevo, was able to escape the siege to be in Barcelona. Another is the case of the swimmer Anja Margetić, who after competing in the Picornell swimming pools, is now, three decades later, our spokesperson in Sarajevo City Council.



Sarajevo, May 1992. A woman defies snipers at one of the most dangerous crossroads in Marijin Dvor. Acting normally and being resilient were the best weapons to survive the 1,450-day siege. Photography by Jordi Pujol Puente

However, the emotional peak was undoubtedly the night of the meeting of Olympic cities before the opening ceremony for the Barcelona 92 Games in the Montjuïc stadium. Mayor Muhamed Kresevljaković took the floor to announce to his colleagues that he had been able to speak briefly with Sarajevo and that bombs were still falling on his city. At that moment, the mayors of Barcelona, Paris and Amsterdam, Pasqual Maragall, Jacques Chirac and Ed van Tijn, respectively, stood up to propose a coalition of Olympic cities determined to support the relief and reconstruction of Sarajevo as soon as possible. The following day, at the opening of the XXV Olympic Games, Maragall proclaimed the need for an Olympic truce in the former Yugoslavia, agreed on with the United Nations.

Unprecedented solidarity

Sarajevo was quite clearly the focus of Catalan society. While the arrival and integration of some 3,000 Bosnian refugees gained momentum, the institutions joined forces in the "Europe x Bosnia" campaign (later "Catalonia x Bosnia", with greater participation from the Generalitat), promoted by the MEP and former UNHCR High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina José María Mendiluce. This platform coordinated the humanitarian efforts of dozens of municipalities and NGOs throughout the country, protest actions and demonstrations, with rallies taking place on Mondays at 8 p.m., and media guerilla tactics to force European diplomacy into stern reaction to the atrocities being committed in the Balkans.

The outpouring of solidarity was so immense that Mayor Maragall came up with a unique formula, not once repeated by any other city in the world, of proclaiming the besieged Sarajevo the 11th district of the Catalan capital. This gave the campaign an institutional structure, providing it with the resources and procedures of a municipal district, streamlining organisation and facilitating ongoing coordination. In Barcelona, "District 11"

had a political leader, Councillor Teresa Sandoval, and a manager, Manel Vila, who had already headed the first convoy of humanitarian aid to Sarajevo with surplus food provided by the Olympic and Paralympic Games organising committee, in conjunction with its managing director, Josep Miquel Abad.

The other pillar of this gigantic bridge of friendship and cooperation was erected in Sarajevo itself, once the ceasefire and the Dayton peace accords (1995-1996) allowed delegations to arrive with a minimum degree of security. Barcelona chose premises on the front line, opposite the strategic Skenderija Bridge, very close to the Presidency and the former City Hall (which later became the canton government building), to open a Barcelona-Sarajevo Embassy for Local Democracy (ADL) under the umbrella of the Council of Europe Congress of Local Authorities and Regions of Europe (CLRAE). Mayor Maragall entrusted two journalists to get the project going: the first director was Carles Bosch, then a reporter for the Televisió de Catalunya (TV3), and the second, myself, Eric Hauck, a journalist for the *Avui* newspaper who arrived with Jordi Pujol Puente in Sarajevo. These street-level offices, with their Euroclub for young people led by Airy Maragall, quickly became an oasis of light and colour, where young people could engage in activities and access the Internet and international publications, giving them a few hours' respite from worrying about the physical, human and cultural destruction outside.

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District 11 and the ADL were given the task of managing the reconstruction of the main Olympic facilities in the city centre, which had been destroyed during the siege: essentially, the Olympic village of Mojmilo (more than a thousand flats, grouped in 10 buildings, in the middle of the western front line and surrounded by minefields) and the Zetra sports hall, the venue for the closing ceremony of the 1984 Olympic Games. This had been bombed and consumed by flames on the same day we managed to evacuate the body of Jordi Pujol Puente. The reconstruction – financed by the International Olympic Committee, at the behest of President Joan Antoni Samaranch (as well loved in Sarajevo as Marshal Tito himself), the European Community Humanitarian Office (Directorate-General for Civil Protection and European Humanitarian Aid Operations, ECHO), Barcelona City Council, the governments of Spain and Norway and the city of Amsterdam – required an investment of some 35 million euros.

Honorary citizens

It is not surprising, then, that four Catalans appear on the list of the 40 or so honorary citizens named by Sarajevo's municipal council since 2000: the names of Pasqual Maragall, Manel Vila, the emeritus president of the Barcelona Royal Tennis Club Joan Maria Tintoré

and Jordi Pujol Puente (posthumously) are listed as defenders and disseminators of Sarajevo's multicultural spirit, peaceful resistance and resilience. They share this honour with the great figures who gave their all to raise the visibility of the Bosnian capital during the 1,450 days of siege. Among them are the singers Bono (impossible to forget the U2 concert in the Koševo stadium on 23 September 1997, with 10,000 peacekeepers in the stands, along with thousands of voices chanting the lyrics of "Miss Sarajevo"), Bruce Dickinson (Iron Maiden), Luciano Pavarotti, the actress and UNHCR ambassador Angelina Jolie, Presidents Jacques Chirac (France) and Stipe Mesić (Yugoslavia and Croatia), and the Yugoslav hero of the 1984 Winter Olympics, Slovenian skier Jure Franko.

We have always said —and say it again today— that Sarajevo has taught us much more than we were able to give in terms of humanitarian aid, cooperation and investment. It is worth highlighting their determination and creativity, their unique wit and sense of humour to survive the most tragic moments and, above all, how they found the most powerful weapon to defend the *duh* (the spirit and soul of this Jerusalem of Europe, the alternative cultural capital of the 1970s and 1980s) from culturicide: with ever more culture. Never before had the city published so many books, organised so many acoustic concerts in the cellars or staged so many candlelit theatrical performances as during the siege.

The International Catalan Institute for Peace (ICIP) twice wanted to recognise the contribution of the Bosnian people to a Peace (with a capital P, understood as the absence of war, social conflicts, environmental emergencies, inequalities and crimes against humanity) that is becoming increasingly more distant. We are still failing to learn or, as this year's ICIP Award winner, the researcher Vicenç Fisas, said [3] are incapable of preventing conflicts, simply out of idleness. And here lies the value of the 2013 awards to Jovan Divjak, the commander of the defence of Sarajevo, who offered a future to thousands of orphaned children after the war, and the 2023 awards to associations fighting for the memory and recognition of the 50,000 victims of systematic war violations and the forgotten children born of those atrocities: Meliha Merđić, Amela Međuseljac, Ajna Jusić and Alen Muhić. Their story has seen the light of day in our country thanks to the Culture and Conflict team's project *There is Still Someone in the Woods* (*Encara hi ha algú al bosc*) in video, photo and documentary theatre format, which has given over 50 performances in Catalonia and Spain, as well as in Ljubljana (Slovenia), Zagreb (Croatia) and Sarajevo itself.

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On the stone monolith that commemorates the end of the renovations in the village of Mojmilo on 30 March 1999, Pasqual Maragall wanted to immortalise a thought that had

been haunting him since the failed Olympic truce of 1992: “Europe is reborn in Sarajevo”. On the threshold of the new millennium, one might think we should have learned from this experience and made the cry of “never again”, with which we Europeans vowed to prevent a new holocaust or further genocides, a reality. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Twenty-five years later, the Balkans are walking a dangerous knife edge, with the potential to topple them from the European Union bandwagon or into a new armed conflict. They are in the midst of two unpredictable wars, Ukraine and the Middle East, in the context of an unprecedented multi-level crisis (of society, energy, climate, the environment, food, values and security), causing an unprecedented wave of migration to Europe and leaving nearly 30,000 people dead [4] drowned in the Mediterranean. A true *mare mortum*.

Test for Europe’s regeneration

It is here, in this region, that the European Union’s ability to rethink and finally act as a single block is being put to the test. Before Russian President Vladimir Putin has the chance to pull several more triggers in Transnistria, Republika Srpska or Kosovo, Brussels will have to rush to implement the internal reforms allowing it to bring into the Union the nine states seeking shelter: Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and the Western Balkan countries, the WB6: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo.

Since the recently formed Ministry for Foreign Action of the Government of Catalonia, under the leadership of Minister Raül Romeva, created the Delegation to Southeastern Europe (based in Zagreb) in September 2016, the Catalan Government has expressed its support for the rapid integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union. It has contributed to this by using whatever influence it has, in the form of lobbying European institutions, as part of the strategy of a Mediterranean macro-region, and by facilitating commercial, cultural and knowledge exchanges.

Unfortunately, this traffic between Catalonia and the Balkans has been less frequent than we would have liked due to the poor air, rail and sea connections of capitals such as Tirana, Podgorica, Sarajevo and Zagreb with Barcelona.

It is time to cross the old bridge we built in the 1990s so that our children’s generation can finish the job. The foundation is unique and of high human value. We shall not have any more opportunities. We cannot fail them again. At stake is our common future, a renewed, just, prosperous and peaceful Europe.

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4 — Data updated on Statista.com and collected by the organisation Open Arms.

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Eric Hauck is a journalist and expert in public diplomacy. He was a diplomatic and war correspondent in Eastern Europe and the Middle East from 1989 to 2003, covering the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Romanian Revolution, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the siege of Sarajevo and the two Gulf Wars. From Barcelona City Council (District 11) he participated in the reconstruction of the Olympic facilities in Sarajevo after the siege. As a project manager for the International Olympic Committee, he was also involved in constituting the first unified Olympic team of Bosnia and Herzegovina. From 2017 to 2024, he was the Catalan Government's delegate to eight countries in South-Eastern Europe.