

## **Broken Bridges, Disrupted Lives**

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The bridges of Novi Sad were life itself. Now they're gone, and the city has been split in two.

April 1999 will be remembered in Novi Sad as the month in which this picturesque city on the Danube lost its bridges and was split in two. The bridges meant life to Novi Sad, and now they are gone.

In the course of the month NATO war planes destroyed all the bridges across the Danube. The city was famous for these bridges, linking the left and right banks, formerly called Novi Sad and Petrovaradin respectively, and joining the regions of Backa and Srem.

The railway bridge was completed in 1961. Before it was officially named, the citizens of Novi Sad used to call it Zezelj's Bridge, after the architect who designed it. Now it has sunk into the river's sandy bed, as if its sturdy arches had never existed.

The stump of a damaged column protrudes from the water. When built, it was one of the first bridges in the world to be made out of reinforced concrete. But it could not withstand four NATO attacks.

The bridge took a direct hit in the early hours of 25 April. Eyewitnesses said that concrete debris flew over a four-story building. There were no casualties.

Windows on near-by buildings and parked cars were, however, damaged, along with the water system. Now parts of Novi Sad and the villages on the left bank of the river in Backa are without water. Villages on the right bank of the river are also without gas, which has been cut for safety reasons.

Aleksandar Ivkovac, the city's chief information officer, told IWPR that since the destruction of Zezelj's Bridge Novi Sad has been on the edge of a humanitarian catastrophe.

"Drinking water supplies are now intermittent for about 440,000 people. In the villages alternative wells are being used, but the water has to be boiled," he said. "Parts of the right hand bank of the Danube no longer have access to emergency medical aid and pregnant women there cannot get to the city's obstetrics ward. And we are having difficulties helping patients who require regular dialysis."

On the bank, in front of the where the Varadinski Bridge stood until April 1, people stand and stare in disbelief. For the citizens of Novi Sad it was usually known as the Old Bridge and used to walk to the fortress.

"When I saw what used to be the bridge, I burst into tears," said a lady living in a flat nearby who has temporarily moved with her children to her parents' home.

"My entire life flashed before my eyes--from the time my parents took me by the hand as we crossed, warning me to watch how I walked across the planks, through which I could see the water, to the time I told my own children, just like my father once told me, to look at the clock on the castle to overcome giddiness."

The clock on the Petrovaradin fortress, built when Novi Sad was part of the Habsburg Empire, has been witness to many wars. Explanations of the military importance of this bridge at NATO headquarters cause bitterness and anger among citizens of Novi Sad.

"Was this bridge really a strategic target" It was only important to us, since it is linked to all our memories. It was on this bridge I first kissed," said one lady. Not hiding her age, she explained that in her youth she had worked on its reconstruction after an older bridge had been destroyed by bombing at the end of the Second World War.

Several hundred metres upstream columns of another bridge can be seen protruding out of the water. That was destroyed in April 1941 by the army of Royal Yugoslavia as it retreated in the wake of the Nazi invasion.

>From there it is just possible to make out the outline, behind a bend in the Danube, of the newest of Novi Sad's bridges, the Freedom Bridge, now broken in two places. It used to link Novi Sad and Sremska Kamenica just above the city's beach.

It was built on shifting sands and the columns on its right bank had to be constantly monitored. It could not take heavy trucks.

For the citizens of Novi Sad, it was the most direct route to the only hospital in town specialising in cardiovascular diseases and heart surgery, a hospital which had a world-wide reputation.

The clinics for oncology and chest diseases are also part of this hospital complex. They too were attacked in the early evening of April 3. Patients there at the time were fortunate to survive unscathed.

Few can understand the reasons behind an attack on the Banovina building in the centre of Novi Sad, a huge 1930s marble construction reminiscent of a ship sailing down the street towards the Danube.

For an outsider, it may simply be an administrative building; for the citizens of Novi Sad it is a sentimental landmark.

Despite everything, life goes on and Novi Sad's citizens continue to live and work on the both banks of the Danube. They cross the river on a raft and small boats.

Conditions are most difficult in Sangaj, a predominantly Roma settlement adjacent to the oil refinery, which has been hit on countless occasions. Flames from the burning refinery extend high above the city after each new attack. The 2,500 residents are evacuated every night and only return when the all-clear sounds. Total evacuation is not possible since there is nowhere for them to go.

At the beginning of the bombing campaign, air raid sirens wailed every day at nightfall. But there are no longer any rules. Sometimes the siren wails in the middle of the day, sometimes in the middle of the night.

Not all citizens react in the same way. Some go down into the shelters, some sit at home, and some in cafes.

"It's easiest for me to take my children into the shelter and for all of us to sleep there peacefully, than for me to wake them after the bombing starts. The children play and don't listen to the explosions, they cry less and go to bed at roughly the same time as they would normally," explains Vesna, a nurse.

The most worried in the shelters are the refugees from Croatia and Bosnia who have already experienced war. Those without such experience, cheer each time Yugoslavia's anti-aircraft guns open fire.

But all citizens of Novi Sad frequently ask the same two questions: Why is the bombing of their city happening? And how long will it last?

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**Location:** Croatia  
Bosnia and  
Herzegovina

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