

The Albanian Media in Kosovo and the Spectre of Ethnic Cleansing

by
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Kosovo, the dust-swept Plain of the Blackbirds in the southern Balkans, is many things to many people. For the majority of its inhabitants, it is now the self-declared Republic of Kosovo under foreign military occupation, a country longing for democracy and freedom from the brutal Serbian yoke, an ethnically Albanian territory since the beginning of time. For the small Serbian minority, Kosovo is a nostalgic reverie of Old Serbia, the very cradle of Serbian Orthodox civilization now overrun by the Moslem hordes. For all of its inhabitants, it is the powder-keg of Europe, a land of passions. Christine von Kohl and Wolfgang Libal described the significance of Kosovo recently in the following terms: "For the Serbs, Kosovo is the 'holy land' of their history. For the Albanians, Kosovo is the quintessence of their future."¹

Albanians and Serbs have been living together in Kosovo for centuries now. Though never completely at ease with one another, they have, during some happier eras of their common history, managed to co-exist in friendship and harmony. In many periods, though, relations between the two peoples have been tense. Since the Serbian military took direct control of Kosovo in 1990 against the will of the Albanians who now make up about 85-90% of the population, the situation has once again become explosive. Serbian expansionist dreams in Bosnia and Croatia have been paralleled here by an unrelenting and ruthless will to make Kosovo Serbian and Serbian only.

In order to control a people, as any experienced dictator will tell you, one must first impede the free flow of information and ideas. It is for this reason that the Serbian authorities began their takeover of Kosovo in the summer of 1990 by putting an immediate halt to all radio and television broadcasting (with the exception of programmes in Serbian) and by shutting down *Rilindja*, the only Albanian-language daily newspaper in Kosovo. Step two was the exclusion of Albanians from the University of Kosovo in the autumn of 1991. Education at the University of Kosovo is presently available only to Serbian students with Serbian teachers and professors. Now Albanian secondary schools and even elementary schools are being eliminated in a conscious or unconscious bid to transform the people of Kosovo into uninformed, malleable peasants.

In this state of willfully created chaos, the sole defence of the Kosovo Albanian people, ignored by the international community and more or less abandoned by Albania, are its intellectuals, among whom its writers and educators. They have not fled the country and are courageously endeavouring to give direction to an unarmed, frightened and disoriented population. Ibrahim Rugova², a noted literary critic and now President of the self-proclaimed

¹ Christine von Kohl & Wolfgang Libal, *Kosovo: gordischer Knoten des Balkan* (Vienna & Zürich: Europaverlag 1992), ISBN 3-203-51161-4, p. 146.

² Ibrahim Rugova was born near Istog / Istok on 2 December 1944 and studied in Prishtina and at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* in Paris under Roland Barthes. He later worked on the staff of the Albanological Institute in Prishtina. Among his works of literary criticism are: *Vepra e Bogdanit 1675-1685*, Prishtina: Rilindja 1982 (The works of Bogdani,

Republic of Kosovo, has worked miracles in channelling the extreme frustration of his isolated people into passive resistance at the most.

The two million or so inhabitants of Kosovo have been without their own **television** for five years now. A private channel in Kosovo, even if it could be financed, would certainly not be tolerated at the moment by the ruling authorities in Belgrade. The two-hour satellite TV programme on *RTSh* (Albanian Radio & Television), begun in the autumn of 1993 and presently broadcast from Tirana every evening³, reaches the many viewers with a satellite dish throughout Kosovo and is very popular, despite the often modest quality of broadcasts and the lack of depth of its coverage of affairs in Kosovo. About half of Kosovo (the western part of the country including Prizren, Gjakova / Djakovica and Peja / Pec, but not Prishtina) also receives *RTSh* broadcasts with a traditional antenna. The meager and tendentious half-hour Albanian-language news programme broadcast daily on state-controlled Serbian television in Prishtina, translated from Serbian and indeed read by Serbian speakers, is hardly watched at all in view of the political climate. It is rejected by the vast majority of Kosovo Albanians as crude Serbian propaganda.

Radio is a more widespread source of information in Kosovo, although since the closing down of Radio Prishtina, the Albanian-speakers in Kosovo can certainly be considered the most disadvantaged consumers on the European continent. State-controlled Serbian Radio in Prishtina transmits censored and highly tendentious news bulletins in Albanian every day but, as with television, such radio broadcasts are largely boycotted by the public. No private or independent radio broadcasting has arisen in Kosovo as yet, not even an underground station. Tuning into programmes from neighbouring Albania was always illegal for Kosovo Albanians. Nonetheless, the medium-wave broadcasts from Radio Tirana and Radio Kukës are listened to regularly in homes throughout Kosovo, as is Radio Tirana's special half-hour daily service for Kosovo.

Short-wave listeners can tune into daily broadcasts of world news and current events in Albanian not only from Radio Tirana, but also from a number of foreign stations. The most popular of these for Kosovo Albanians is the Albanian-language service of the *Voice of America* (Washington), the three daily broadcasts⁴ of which are considered well-informed and up-to-date on current events. Increasingly popular is the late-night news programme⁵ broadcast by *Deutsche Welle* (Cologne), also available via satellite⁶. The director of the Albanian-language service from

1675-1685); *Kahe dhe premisa të kritikës letrare shqiptare 1504-1983*, Prishtina: Instituti Albanologjik 1986 (Directions and premises of Albanian literary criticism, 1504-1983); and *Refuzimi estetik*, Prishtina: Rilindja 1987 (The aesthetic refusal). On 23 December 1989, Ibrahim Rugova was made head of the Democratic League of Kosovo and on 24 May 1992, after the formal declaration of independence, he was elected President of the Republic of Kosovo. He lives miraculously in Prishtina. Cf. the volume *Ibrahim Rugova. La question du Kosovo. Entretiens avec Marie-Françoise Allain et Xavier Galmiche. Préface de Ismail Kadaré* (Paris: Fayard 1994), ISBN 2-213-59247-0.

³ 8:35 to 20:30 CET on Eutel F3 (16° east).

⁴ 7:00-7:30, 15:00-15:30 & 18:00-18:30 CET.

⁵ 22:00-22:30 CET.

⁶ 20:00-20:30 CET on Eutel II F1 and Astra IA.

Cologne, journalist Adelheid Feilcke-Tiemann, had the dubious distinction, during a visit to Kosovo in April 1994, of being interrogated by the Serbian police for six hours, during which all her notes, film material, recordings and money were confiscated (the latter, according to Serbian border guards, as her voluntary contribution to compensate for the blockade). Since 1993, two half-hour programmes⁷ in Albanian have also been being broadcast daily by the *BBC* (London), which provides excellent coverage of world affairs and a survey of the Albanian press, but is considered by some listeners to provide less information on Kosovo.

The *Rilindja newspaper*, formerly the only Albanian-language daily in Yugoslavia, has been driven into exile. It has been published in parallel daily editions in Tirana for Albania and in Zofingen (Switzerland) for Western Europe, and is soon to begin publication in an expanded edition in Germany. Neither of the present editions is available in Kosovo. *Rilindja's* current replacement in Kosovo is *Bujku* (The farmer), which appears on an almost daily basis in Prishtina and gets most of its information directly from the wire service of *Rilindja* in Switzerland. The other Albanian-language newspaper in former Yugoslavia, *Flaka e vëllazërimit* (The flame of brotherhood) of Skopje in Macedonia, which has been being issued daily now since mid-May 1994, is difficult to obtain in Kosovo, and the daily *Bota sot* (The world today), which began publication in Zürich on 26 June 1995, caters for the moment only to the western European market.

Weekly **magazines** such as *Zëri* (The voice), edited by Bardh Hamzaj, and the somewhat more professional and more critical *Koha* (The time), edited by Veton Surroi, do appear in Prishtina on a more or less regular basis, but suffer, like almost all the media in Kosovo, from an surfeit of subjective commentaries on the political situation there and from a glaring lack of information on European and global affairs. The situation has improved somewhat over the last twelve months, though. Other periodicals such as the literary *Fjala* (The word), the educational *Shkëndija* (The spark) and the children's *Pionieri* (The pioneer) appear sporadically.

The *Rilindja* Press of Prishtina, which published over 90% of Albanian **books and periodicals** in what was once Yugoslavia, has been taken over by *Panorama*, a creation of the Serbian occupation authorities. It is, however, still quite possible to publish a book in Kosovo privately. Like everything else in the country, it is all a question of money. There are no longer problems of censorship, as books are marketed directly and never pass through the hands of Serbian government authorities. In 1994, about 60 Albanian-language books were still published in Kosovo, of which about 50 are works of creative literature, poetry for the most part.

One of the few positive consequences of the expulsion of Albanian workers and professionals from public life in Kosovo has been that the Albanians were forced immediately to create a private sector, thus introducing a free market parallel economy to Kosovo more quickly than has been the case in some other Balkan countries.

Not only has a free market been created, but also an entire alternative system of public life, under the vague auspices of a Kosovo 'government in exile.' University education continues, for instance, on a private basis. Classes for students are held in private homes, mosques and churches instead of at the university. Despite cramped and difficult conditions, many Albanian students appear more eager to learn now than ever before. Last year, an Albanian professor in this alternative education system was indeed earning more than his Serbian counterpart on a 'Yugoslav' state salary. Albanian doctors and medical staff, expelled *en masse* three years ago from state-run hospitals and clinics, have opened private clinics to serve the public. Financing is of course difficult in what is and remains the poorhouse of the European continent, but most

⁷ 7:30-8:00 & 19:00-19:30 CET.

Kosovo Albanians working abroad faithfully pay 3% of their income in taxes to the exile government. As such, a disciplined if somewhat rudimentary system of government has been put in place and functions more or less successfully.

On the other side, the Belgrade authorities have been doing everything they can to 'serbify' Kosovo and to wipe out all traces of Albanian culture there. The Kosovo State Archives and Albanian-language books from the National and University Library in Prishtina are said to have been carted off long ago to a brick factory to help 'ease the fuel crisis', as was cynically noted. Bilingual (Albanian / Serbian) signs have been removed from public buildings and replaced by signs in Serbian only. Streets, schools and public institutions have been renamed after figures of Serbian history and culture. Absurd plans also abound for the construction of huge demonstrative Serbian Orthodox churches, one right on the campus of the University of Kosovo in downtown Prishtina and another in the purely Albanian city of Gjakova / Djakovica, where over 95% of the population are Albanian Moslems and Catholics.

In March 1994, one of the ultimate acts of barbarity in the annihilation of Kosovo Albanian culture took place. The Belgrade authorities served notice that they, quite coincidentally, needed the modern structure housing the venerable **Albanological Institute** in Prishtina. Researchers and staff at the Institute had been working magnanimously for three years, deprived not only of their meagre salaries, but also of heating and light. On 8 March 1994, a Serbian paramilitary unit, having forced its way into the building, beat up and expelled the occupants, among whom a good number of noted Albanian writers and intellectuals, under the very eyes of the (Serbian) police. The take-over, and perhaps destruction of the Albanological Institute⁸, housing one of the largest collections of Albanian-language books in the Balkans, is a blow to European culture and one which merits severe condemnation from intellectuals everywhere.

Virtually all that remains in the once blossoming field of public cultural activity in Kosovo is the little 'hut' of the Writers Union of Kosovo on the corner of a muddy parking lot in Prishtina. This modest structure, also housing the main Albanian political party, the Democratic League of Kosovo (*Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës*), is situated symbolically, or strategically as some might say, right behind the Serbian police headquarters, the law courts and Prishtina central prison.

The building stands, but the arrest, abuse and imprisonment of writers is continuing on an almost systematic basis. Indeed it is becoming increasingly difficult nowadays to find a Kosovo Albanian writer or intellectual who has not been to prison, or at least been taken into custody. Punishment for writers and intellectuals usually ranges from one month to several years in Serbian jails, depending on the sins they are accused of. The lucky ones get off lightly - they are simply invited to police headquarters for 'informative talks' and return home the next morning with a bruised lip or a broken rib.

Typical of the continuing harassment of Albanian intellectuals in Kosovo is the sentence given to Professor Agim Vinca⁹, not only a leading poet and poetry critic but also a politically

⁸ For a survey of the scholarly work of the Albanological Institute, cf. the volume: Fazli Sylva, Shaqir Berani, Anton Berisha, Bajram Krasniqi & Ibrahim Rugova (ed.): *Njëzet vjet të Institutit Albanologjik (1967-1987). Botim jubilar. Vingt ans de l'Institut Albanologique (1967-1987). Edition jubilaire*, Prishtina: Instituti Albanologjik 1987 (Twenty years of the Albanological Institute (1967-1987). Jubilee edition).

⁹ Agim Vinca was born in Veleshta near Struga in Macedonia in 1947. He studied Albanian language and literature at the University of Prishtina where he taught contemporary

active writer and speaker in Kosovo. On 21 May 1994, it was announced that Vinca, professor at the University of Kosovo in Prishtina until his expulsion, had been sentenced to thirty days in prison, plus payment of all expenses for the court proceedings and the withdrawal of his passport for a period of three years. His heinous crime was travel, a private visit to Albania on 8 November 1993. According Yugoslav legislation¹⁰, still very much enforced in Kosovo, it is unlawful for Kosovo Albanians to visit Albania without an **exit visa**. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and of Eastern European communism, Kosovo Albanians thus remain the only citizens of Europe requiring authorization to travel abroad.

Vinca's is by no means an isolated case. Rexhep Qosja¹¹, father figure of the nation, had his passport taken away last year for the same crime. He was unable to attend ceremonies in Paris to mark Gallimard's publication of the French translation of his compelling novel *La mort me vient de ces yeux-là*, Paris 1994 (Death comes with such eyes). In all, about two thousand Albanian intellectuals, including a good number of university professors, have been deprived of their travel documents. The irony of the situation is that intellectuals are not being let out of the country while, at the same time, Serbian policies are once again concentrated on emptying Kosovo of its native population and on resettling the land with Serbian colonists.

It is apparent to all knowledgeable observers of the current situation that the awesome spectre of **ethnic cleansing**¹² has already become a reality in Kosovo. According to unofficial estimates, ca. 20% of the Albanian population of Kosovo has been driven into exile since the

literature until he was expelled in September 1991 by the Serbian military. In addition to his literary works, he is author of criticism: *Struktura e zhvillimit të poezisë së sotme shqipe 1945-1980*, Prishtina: Rilindja 1985 (The structure of the development of modern Albanian poetry 1945-1980) and *Orët e poezisë*, Prishtina: Rilindja 1990 (Poetry hours), and of the extensive political monograph: *Populli i pandalur*, Prishtina: Zëri, 1992 (The unstoppable people).

¹⁰ Articles 2.1 and 47.1 of the 1981 Law on Official Documents for Citizens of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

¹¹ Kosovo scholar, writer and literary critic. Born in 1936, Qosja studied Albanian language and literature in Prishtina and Belgrade and is now a member of the Kosovo Academy of Sciences and Art, as well as a leading political figure in Kosovo. He is the author of many works on Albanian literature and on the present political situation, among which are: *Dialogje me shkrimtarët*, Prishtina: Rilindja 1968 (Dialogues with writers); *Panteoni i rralluar*, Prishtina: Rilindja 1973 (A rarified Pantheon); *Morfologjia e një fushatë*, Prishtina: Instituti Albanologjik 1980 (The morphology of a campaign); a three-volume *Historia e letërsisë shqipe, Romantizmi*, Prishtina: Rilindja 1984, 1984, 1986 (History of Albanian literature, Romanticism); *Populli i ndaluar*, Prishtina: Mega Medium 1990 (The banned people); *Strategjia e bashkimit shqiptar*, Prishtina: Instituti Albanologjik 1992 (The strategy of Albanian unification); and *Çështja shqiptare, Historia dhe politika*, Prishtina: Instituti Albanologjik 1994 (The Albanian question, History and politics). His novel *Vdekja më vjen prej syve të tillë*, Prishtina: Rilindja 1974 (Death comes with such eyes), has been translated into French as *La mort me vient de ces yeux-là*, Paris: Gallimard 1994 and German as *In solchen Augen liegt der Tod*, Innsbruck: Haymon 1995.

¹² On the ideology of Serbian ethnic cleansing, cf. Mirko Grmek, Marc Gjidara, & Neven Šimac: *Le nettoyage ethnique. Documents historiques sur une idéologie serbe* (Paris: Fayard 1993), ISBN 2-213-03098-7.

takeover in 1990, i.e. well over 300,000 people, young men for the most part, who are the most productive members of that society. Left behind for the moment are the women, children and old people, whose fate, if the insanity in Belgrade continues, may soon resemble that of their counterparts in Bosnia and Hercegovina.