

ALBANIAN PERIL IN KOSOVO

by

Robert Elsie

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 the self-declared Republic of Kosovo under foreign military occupation, a country longing for democracy and freedom from the brutal Serbian yoke, an ethnic-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 overrun by the Turkish-Moslem hordes and a remaining part of Yugoslavia ruled by Belgrade. For all of its inhabitants, it is the powder-keg of Europe, a land of passions.

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 85 to 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.

The Serbian authorities began their takeover of Kosovo by halting all radio and television broadcasting except programs 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 is presently available only to Serbian students with Serbian teachers and professors. Albanian-language secondary schools and elementary schools are being eliminated in a bid to transform the people of Kosovo into uninformed, malleable peasants.

In this state of willfully created chaos, the sole defense of the Kosovo-Albanian people, ignored by the international community and more or less abandoned by Albania, are its intellectuals, writers and educators. They have not fled the country and are courageously endeavoring to give direction to an unarmed, frightened and disoriented population. Ibrahim Rugova, a noted literary critic and now President of the self-proclaimed Republic of Kosovo, has worked miracles in channeling 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 channel for five years. A private channel in Kosovo, even if it could be financed, would not be tolerated by Belgrade. The two-hour satellite TV program on RTSh (Albanian Radio & Television), began in the autumn of 1993 and broadcast from Tirana every evening, reaching many viewers with satellite dishes throughout Kosovo. It is popular, despite the modest quality of broadcasts and the lack of depth in coverage of affairs in Kosovo. About half of Kosovo, the western part but not Prishtina, the largest city, also receives RTSh with traditional antennas.

The meager and tendentious half-hour Albanian-language news program broadcast daily on state-controlled Serbian television in Prishtina, translated from Serbian and read by Serbian speakers, is hardly watched 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 programs from neighboring 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, the three daily broadcasts of which are considered well-informed and up-to-date on current events. Increasingly popular is the late-night news program broadcast by Deutsche Welle (Cologne).

The director of the Albanian-language service from Cologne, journalist Adelheid Feilcke-Tiemann, during a visit to Kosovo in April 1994, was interrogated by the Serbian police for six hours, during which all her notes, film material, recordings and money were confiscated. Since 1993, two half-hour programs in Albanian have also been being broadcast daily by the BBC, which provides excellent coverage of world affairs and a survey of the Albanian press.

The Rilindja newspaper, formerly the only Albanian-language daily in Yugoslavia, is now published in parallel daily editions in Tirana for Albania and in 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 news from the service of Rilindja in Switzerland.

The other Albanian-language newspaper in former Yugoslavia, Flaka e vëllazërimit (The Flame of Brotherhood) of Skopje, Macedonia, has been issued daily since mid-May 1994, but is difficult to obtain in Kosovo. The daily Bota sot (The World Today), which began publication in Zürich last June, caters only to the western European market.

Weekly magazines such as Zëri (The Voice), edited by Bardh Hamzaj, and the 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 local political situation 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 percent of Albanian books and periodicals in what was once Yugoslavia, has been taken over by Panorama, a creation of the Serbian occupation authorities. Still, it is 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.

One of the few positive consequences of the expulsion of Albanians from public life in Kosovo has been that the Albanians were forced immediately to create a private sector, thus introducing a free market 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.

Most Kosovo Albanians working abroad faithfully pay 3 percent 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.

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.'

In March 1994, the Belgrade authorities served notice that they needed the modern structure housing the venerable Albanological Institute in Prishtina, where researchers and staff had been working for three years, deprived of their meager salaries, heating and light. A Serbian paramilitary unit beat up and expelled the occupants, including noted Albanian writers and intellectuals, under the eyes of the Serbian police. The take-over, and perhaps destruction of the Albanological Institute, housing one of the largest collections of Albanian-language books in the Balkans, 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.

It is apparent to all knowledgeable observers of the current situation that the awesome specter of ethnic cleansing has already become a reality in Kosovo. According to unofficial estimates, 20 percent of the Albanian population of Kosovo has been driven into exile since the takeover in 1990, 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.

[Published in: Nieman Reports, the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University, Vol. L, 2, summer 1996, p. 79-81.]