

Minorities in Kosovo

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Introduction

Kosovo is a territory which is still disputed in the Balkans. For the Albanian people it is a self-declared Republic since February 17, 2008, recognized by 70 countries in the world (among them the USA, Germany and France). It is considered a parliamentary representative democracy. According to the Constitution, "Republic of Kosovo is a secular state and neutral on religious beliefs". Serbia does not consider this territory an independent country. The Constitution of 2006 considers it as a governed entity within its sovereign territory, the "Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija". The Republic of Yugoslavia was composed of federal republics within a federal state (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Montenegro). After the wars in the 90's all of these territories became independent and were recognized. Kosovo was considered and is still considered as a single province within the Republic of Serbia. This was not the first time that a single province declared its independence unilaterally. In 1991, Tatarstan, Chechnya, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh had already done so; however, it was the first time that a significant number of nations recognized this independence. This was followed by Russia, which in 2008, recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia (but not Kosovo). In October 2008, following a vote at the UN General Assembly, Serbia asked the International Court of Justice to rule on the legality of Kosovo's declaration of independence. In July 22, 2010, the ICJ declared that it did not violate the international law, and it was possible to declare its independence without violating international law. Now this new country is in deep crisis, mainly economic (at least 50 % of unemployment) but also social. Since this independence, the country has experienced a series of ethnic conflicts causing a wave of emigration, mainly Serbs, even though the government of this new country promised protection for minorities. The current population of Kosovo represents about 2.5 million people, with 92% Albanians (according to the government), 5.3% Serbs, and 2.7% other populations (Bosnian, Goranis, Roma, Turks, Ashkalis and Egyptians). The cohabitation of these populations seems impossible. For example more than 100 Orthodox churches have been looted, vandalized and destroyed by the Albanian population. The northern part of Kosovo, mainly composed of Serbs and controlled by Belgrade, is in real chaos. The population is subject to the law of violence by Serbian criminal groups. The Bosnian people are victims of forced assimilation by some Albanians in spite of the presence of

a peace-keeping army called “Eulex”. The Roma are also victims of this violence against minorities.

There is an explanation for the continuing violence in that country. First the history of Kosovo is, more than anywhere in Europe, a central issue and is still currently responsible for ethnic conflicts. The nature of ethnic conflicts will be explained along with the perspectives for the future.

Two competing visions of History

(I) The political role of History

Kosovo was part of the region of the Dardani which seems to have been occupied first by the Illyrians in the twentieth century BC, before it was conquered by Rome in the 160's BC. The Albanians pretend that the Illyrians are their direct ancestors. It seems to be a way to prove they were in the country before the Serbs, which is still uncertain. The Slavic migration reached the Balkans in the 6th and 7th century after the end of the Roman Empire. Both nationalisms (Serbian and Albanian) pretend they have the historical legitimacy to control this territory. It comes without saying that history in this region has a political goal. It belonged to the Byzantine Empire until 1170. Then it belonged to the Serbian Empire. In 1233 the city of Pec in Metohija (the current Kosovo) was chosen as the seat of the first Serbian archbishop. Since that period, Kosovo became the spiritual center of the Serbs. After the Battle of Kosovo (“Kosovo Polje”) in 1389 in which the Ottoman Empire beat the Serbs, this territory became the symbol of oppression against the Serbs. This date is regularly used to justify why Kosovo has to belong to the Serbian Republic. After 1459, the whole territory of Kosovo came under the dominance of the Ottoman Empire. It was occupied by Austrian troops after the siege of Vienna between 1683 and 1699, but the Ottoman Empire re-established their rules in that region. In that period, many Serbs left Kosovo, marking the demographic breaking point with the weakening of the Serbian population and the progression of Albanians. During the whole period of Ottoman Empire's occupancy Kosovo became a Muslim territory, especially among the Albanians. In 1766, the Ottomans abolished the Patriarchate of Pec causing the situation of Christians to deteriorate. After two significant uprisings in 1804 and 1815, the autonomous Principality of Serbia was created in 1830. It recognized it as an independent country in 1878. During that period Kosovo stayed under Ottoman domination until the Treaty of Bucharest in 1913 resulting from the wars in Balkans. Albanian nationalism was also growing since the League of Prizren in 1878 which marked the beginning of their own political movement. The whole of Kosovo belonged to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia after 1918. During that period the King tried to push Serbs to colonize Kosovo and to decrease the rate of Albanians in the total population.

(II) The impossible reconciliation after the Second World War

In 1941, Yugoslavia and Kosovo became involved. A large part of Kosovo came under Italian-controlled Albania and the other part came under the German occupied Administration of Serbia. During that period the ethnic conflicts between Serbs and Albanians began. The Mussolini regime of Italy exploited the nationalist sentiment among Albanians to gain the favour of the population for the Albanian Protectorate. This encouraged the establishment of Great Albania which was achieved during the Second World War. The Serbs, as Slavic people, were the main victims of this period. After numerous uprisings of partisans led by Fadil Hoxha, Kosovo was liberated after 1944 with the help of the Albanian partisans of the Comintern. It became a province of Serbia within the Democratic Federal Yugoslavia. After that, the communist regime of Tito oppressed nationalism and gave increasingly more political autonomy even when the Serbs were against those reforms. With the Constitution of 1974, Kosovo received a new autonomous status. That was the beginning of a period which was and still is seen as the “gold age” for some Albanians. The problem with that period of communism was that there was not the necessary debate concerning the massacres between Serbs and Albanians during WWII. It should have provided a way to reconcile both communities. However, that historical work was prevented by the communist regime, which considered both communities together against fascism to liberate the country. Among the Albanians and Serbs, parallel histories and memories were maintained in private and oral form, which burst into public space in the late 1980's. So the communist method, preventing any kind of debate in the public space concerning that period was a big failure. After the oppressed demonstrations of Albanian students in 1981 demanding to create an autonomous republic, the gap between both communities increased inexorably. During that period, due to very high birth rate, the percentage of Albanians increased from 75% to 90% of the total population, which increased Serbian fears. The administration discriminated in favour of Serbs which worsened the ethnic relationships. On June 28, 1989, for the 600th birthday of the Battle of Kosovo, Slobodan Milosevic delivered the Gazimestan speech which abolished the political autonomy of Kosovo. That was the beginning of the Serbian cultural oppression and the non-violent separatist movement of Albanians under the leadership of Ibrahim Rugova who had the assistance of armed groups. In 1999, the war of Kosovo began with the intervention of Western countries, the bombing of Belgrade and the occupation of NATO-troops. It comes without saying that since that period, ethnic relations between Serbs and Albanians are in total disarray.

The roots and nature of ethnic conflicts in Kosovo

From our western point of view, religion seems to play a central role in the current conflict between Serbs and Albanians. Since the end of the war there were a significant number of Orthodox churches destroyed by Albanians (more than 100). The role of religion is actually more complex. Islam is the religion of the majority of Albanians, Bosnians, Turks, Gorani, and some Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians (90%). About 5% of the population follows the Roman Catholic tradition. The Serbian population has an overwhelmingly Orthodox Christian tradition. All of the Albanians are distinguished by their low levels of religious practice. Most of them became Muslims during the Ottoman Empire because of fiscal advantages but continued to practice the Christianity in secret. Today a significant number of Albanians consider their nation to have a heavy Christian heritage. It is seen as a way to claim themselves as European people although they still want to be distinguished from the Serbs. There is in fact some sympathy among the Albanians for the Christian culture. For example, Mother Teresa (who comes from Albany) is the most popular woman in the Albanian public opinion. Some rumors say that Ibrahim Rugova was converted to the Catholic Church before his death. And the Albanians know that in their neighboring country of Albania, 30% of the population is Christian (Catholic and Orthodox). That means that Albanians are not necessarily anti-Christian but against the Serbian culture. Even if there are some political differences among the Albanians of different faiths (For example, the Catholics were not in favor of the UCK), there is a great religious tolerance between them. So the Albanian nationalism is primarily linguistic, ethnic and territorial. There is certainly a development of new forms of Islam (especially radical forms) among the Albanians, but this movement is isolated and the Albanians want to show their friendship with Western countries and at first the USA, which recognized their political independence. The radical religious movements are not extended but spread within families, without recruiting new members. The USA is popular among the Albanians and they do not want to be assimilated with other Muslims in the world. The Serbian church, whose place was so important in Kosovo, paid the high price of their political positions. In conclusion, the destruction of more than 100 orthodox churches since 1999 results more from political reasons rather than religious reasons.

The current situation of minorities and the perspectives for the future

Now the situation of ethnic minorities is really worrying. The repression against Albanians in the 1980's broke the last bridges that might exist between both communities. Contrary to their parents, the new generation of Albanians who were born at the end of the 80's does not speak the Serbian language and never had common experiences with Serbs. Their parents experienced the Tito period with Serbs, but the new generation just experienced the war and Serbian oppression. They live totally separated. For example, the city of Mitrovica is divided into two parts. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, people tend to know that they

must live peaceful in the future with other communities, but in Kosovo, the projections of Albanians and Serbs deny all rights of the other people living in this land. There are some attempts to break this logic on a symbolic level, such as the memorandum of the Serbian Church in 2003 to make Kosovo a common “holy land” for Albanians, Serbs, Muslims, and Christians. As far as the other minorities in Kosovo are concerned, the situation is really dark. At first the Roma (considered as pro-Serbian during the war) are victims of a high level of discrimination, oppression, and assimilation. The majority of them already left the country, hoping they would get some protection in western countries. But contrary to the Serbian minority, they are not considered as political refugees. Many of them are sent back to Kosovo (for example those in France or Germany) although they may be sent back to physical and vital danger. The European Commission declared recently that Western countries should stop sending the Roma back even if some of them do not have any official papers (38% are stateless). Among the Amnesty International, the fundamental rights for minorities are not respected in Kosovo, especially by the Albanians. The Goranis who are Slavic and Muslim people are victims of cultural assimilation. The Bosnians and Turks are forced to give up their own culture and to become Albanians, or they must leave the country. The situation in Kosovo is still currently very fragile and its economy remains volatile. Freedom of movement cannot be guaranteed or secured for all. Such is the case for the divided city of Mitrovica. The global economic crisis has implications in that country still surviving on money from the Diaspora in particular. Some political analysts believe the situation will continue to deteriorate in coming months from social tensions.

Conclusion

The situation in Kosovo, even after the declaration of independence in 2008, is still a serious issue. The political realism would be to reach a solution that guaranteed the presence of Serbs in Kosovo, which would ensure the preservation of all monuments and holy places in Kosovo. It would allow the Serbs not to maintain a nationalist fixation around Kosovo’s lost. Since the independence is a threat of dividing the territory in two parts: the North for the Serbs and the South for the Albanians. The prospect of an annexation to the neighboring country Albania for the southern part does not seem to be relevant, because there are still some cultural differences between both sides of Albanians. They were separated for a very long time (Enver Hodja’s regime was totally isolated) and they do not speak the same dialect. Albanians from Albania speak Tosk, while the Albanians from Kosovo speak Gheg. Even if they have the same language, the culture seems to be too different. Albania clearly declared that they want a political unification within the European Union. Very few people think about the “Great Albania” and the biggest issue now is the issue of national minorities. The Serbs are still in danger and obliged to stay together to survive. They can still have the status of political refugees because of the Albanian oppression. As far as the Roma situation, it is becoming worse and worse, not only in Kosovo

but also in Western Europe. The governments do not consider the Roma at the same level as the Serbs and are threatened by the new wave of populism in those industrialized countries. The situation of non-Albanian Muslims is also very serious now, with the heavy Albanian pressure to assimilate them. The Albanian authorities are not strong enough to guarantee their protection, and do not have the political wish to improve their situation.

Sources

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 - <http://www.minorityrights.org/> (Minority Rights)
 - <http://www.amnestyinternational.be/> (Amnesty International)