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Confusion and Corruption in Kosovo

The Slow Birth of a Nation

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Two months after Kosovo declared independence, thousands of foreign experts have descended on its capital to shape Europe's youngest republic into a constitutional state — although its status is still disputed. Soon the EU will take over, and its team can expect a country ruled by corruption and organized crime.

REUTERS

Protesters set fire to the replica of a judge's robe during a protest over the acquittal of Ramush Haradinaj, a former Kosovo prime minister who had been tried for war crimes in The Hague. In other parts of Kosovo, he was celebrated.

It's 8 p.m., and Joachim Rücker, the highest-ranking representative of the United Nations in Pristina, is heading out for a bite to eat. Past Bill Clinton Boulevard, past three mosques, Rücker's Japanese jeep zigzags through the darkened city. His Albanian bodyguards, speaking English, constantly rattle off the vehicle's coordinates into their radio.

But where, exactly, is Rücker? What country is he in?

According to international law, Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, still belongs to Serbian territory. Rücker's boss at UN headquarters in New York, Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, has not said anything new to the contrary. Under UN Resolution 1244, adopted in 1999, Kosovo was placed under an interim UN administration, after enduring a 16-month war that claimed about 10,000 lives. The resolution makes no mention of Kosovo's right to secede from Serbia.

On the other hand, Kosovo unilaterally declared independence on Feb. 17. More than two dozen countries worldwide — including the United States and Germany — have recognized the tiny republic, whose population is 90 percent ethnic Albanian. There are now signs with the words "Republic of Kosovo" along the southern border and Kosovar customs officers at the Pristina airport.

But in the north and in the Serbian enclaves south of the Ibar River, separate elections will probably take place on May 11 — for the Serbian parliament in Belgrade and for the local Serb government. Here, in the shadow of medieval monasteries, time seems to stand still. The Serbian dinar is the standard currency here, and wages, food and political directives come straight from Belgrade.

Kosovo's situation is complex. Two countries claim a territory that is about one and a half times the size of the US state Rhode Island (and has about the same population density). In the middle, acting as a UN referee in a diplomatic minefield, sits Joachim Rücker, 56, the former mayor of the small southwestern German city of Sindelfingen. At the request of the UN Secretary General and in response to pressure from Russia, Rücker is expected to continue behaving as if nothing had happened, as if Serbia's national borders had remained unchanged.

He's returning from a reception held by the newly appointed German ambassador in Pristina. Strictly speaking — according to diplomatic protocol — Rücker had no business there. He was the supreme UN administrator in Serbia's southwestern province, not in a new sovereign nation. But he calls Kosovo's hermaphroditic condition "cohabitation," and manages to find complicated language to describe the future of this torn region.

In June, administrative duties will change hands from the UN to the European Union, which plans to send 2,200 judges, prosecutors, police officers and customs officials to Pristina. But without the approval of the Russians and the Chinese in the Security Council, the UN will hardly be able to slip quietly out of Kosovo. Instead, says Rücker, it will have to maintain its presence, and its mission, "while keeping its status neutral." The UN will have to "reconfigure" itself and emphasize the "discontinuity" between the EU and UN mandates.

The UN will stay in Kosovo, in other words — not shrink away and hope for a change of course in Moscow, Beijing and Belgrade — so that the skirmishes over Europe's youngest state don't turn into a full-blown war.

For now, at least, life is still relatively good in Pristina. The penne arrabiata and chocolate tarts at "Il Passatore," an Italian trattoria, are exceptional. Rücker seems pleased as he leaves the restaurant.

Elephants at the Watering Hole

The UN's Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) is the largest show of strength in the history of the world body. Rücker has led it since 2006. The multinational administrators oversee everything — government, police, judiciary, customs, the economy. The goal of the now nine-year operation is to transform Yugoslavia's former poorhouse into a home for more than two million people that deserves to be called a constitutional state.

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The UN has the active support of the EU, NATO and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), each represented by its own substantial battalion in Kosovo, as well as several hundred non-governmental organizations. Like elephants at a watering hole, the giants of the global peacemaking trade huddle in this disputed corner of Europe and naturally step, now and then, all over each other's toes.

Kosovo's foreign rulers — especially the French, Americans and Germans — are wrestling for billions in reconstruction contracts, for key positions in the new government and for influence over the Kosovar parties and clan leaders. The region is awash with intelligence

agents and soldiers of fortune, idealists and professional adventurers. This international constellation could, of course, hinder the planned birth of democracy here, rather than help it.

The UN has spent an estimated €33 billion ($53 billion) for its mission in Kosovo since 1999, when a NATO bombing campaign drove out former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic's murderous troops. This corresponds to €1,750 ($2,800) per capita, annually — or 160 times the average yearly per capita aid for all developing countries combined.

Nevertheless, UNMIK isn't wanted by everyone here. The streets to UNMIK headquarters in Pristina have been known to be blocked by protest banners reading: "No access. Criminal zone." Stickers are affixed to some traffic lights in the city, displaying "No to EUMIK" when the lights are red and "Independence" when they turn green. At the Strip Depot café, a politician and philosopher called Shkelzen Maliqi, surrounded by disciples lounging on couches, jokes: "Kosovo is a bastard country. You fathered it, and now it's your job to care for it."

Officially, close to half of Kosovo's residents live on less than €3 ($4.80) a day. Kosovo's per capita gross national product is lower than that of North Korea or Papua New Guinea. It has one of the worst balances of trade worldwide and Europe's highest fertility rate. Youth unemployment hovers at 75 percent.

But as long as Albania's young people, equipped with their bulky sunglasses and tiny mobile phones, can camp out in all of Pristina's cafés before the third call of the muezzin, poverty alone won't explain the local population's growing discomfort with the international presence. Studies by scientists, intelligence services and EU panels seek to examine the deeper-seated reasons for this phenomenon.

Kosovo analysts have one thing in common: They paint a picture of a clan-based society in which a handful of criminal leaders controls the population — and are tolerated by bureaucrats from Europe and the rest of the world, who have come here under the guise of enlightening the Kosovars.

'Leading Political and Criminal Figures'

The international community and its representatives in Kosovo bear a significant share of responsibility for the alarming proliferation of Mafia-like structures in Kosovo. As a result of their open support for leading political and criminal figures, they have harmed the credibility of international institutions in numerous ways. (From a study by the Institute for European Politics in Berlin, completed for the German military, the Bundeswehr, in 2007)

UN special envoy Rücker wants nothing to do with "leading political and criminal figures," at least not as long as they've been convicted by a court of law. But not one of the former heroes of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) guerilla force — who liberated Kosovo in their battle with Serbian troops — has so far been sentenced. Now they control Kosovo's politics and economy.

Ramush Haradinaj is a former KLA commander who later became prime minister of UN-administered Kosovo. His indictment in The Hague consisted of 37 charges, including murder, torture, rape and the expulsion of Serbs, Albanians and gypsies in the weeks following the end of the war in 1999. Carla Del Ponte, former chief prosecutor of the UN War

Crimes Tribunal, called him a “gangster in uniform.” He returned to Kosovo this spring, after his acquittal on April 3.

Haradinaj received a hero’s welcome, complete with pistol shots and motorcades through a sea of Albanian flags. But there was also an announcement from UNMIK referring to reservations from The Hague: “The court was under the strong impression that witnesses in this trial did not feel safe.”

Steven Schook, Rücker’s American deputy at UNMIK’s fortress-like headquarters in Pristina, was already out of office by then. But it wasn’t for the reasons provided by local rumor — not because he loved his job too much, as a former American brigadier general claimed; not because of his supposed weakness for beautiful Kosovar women; not because he considered it useful to “get drunk with Ramush Haradinaj once a week,” as described in a German situation analysis.

No, Steven Schook’s contract was officially “not extended” after the UN’s Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) investigated his administration and looked into (unproven) reports that the American had revealed the whereabouts of a man who had testified against Haradinaj. The man was living under a UN witness protection program.

Even before that, though, Schook’s boss at UNMIK — Rücker — had given Haradinaj an exceptional private audience before his departure to a prison cell in The Hague. Rücker still insists this treatment was justified for a political alpha dog. “It’s a completely normal order of business for a former prime minister and party chairman to pay me a visit before embarking on a longer journey.”

As a result of his suspended sentence, Haradinaj’s “longer journey” ended up being shorter than expected. During the trial he was even permitted to run as a candidate in the elections for the Kosovar parliament — with UNMIK’s blessing. Because of Haradinaj’s background, this attracted attention far beyond the borders of his native region.

Wanting to be Boss

The family clan structure in the Decani region from which Haradinaj derives his power is involved in a wide range of criminal, political and military activities that greatly influence the security situation throughout Kosovo. The group consists of about 100 members, and deals in the drug and weapons smuggling business, as well as in the illegal trade in dutiable goods. (From a 2005 report by the Bundesnachrichtendienst, Germany’s foreign intelligence agency)

These charges weren’t brought up in The Hague. But now that Haradinaj, dressed in a suit and tie, has returned to the political arena, he can call for new elections and consider himself officially confirmed as the guiding figure of an independent Kosovo. The demand for politicians with an untarnished name has grown considerably. Yet according to a study completed last year, “mafia boss” is the most commonly cited dream profession among children in and around Pristina.

More Greed Than Pioneer Spirit

AP

Grateful graffiti, after Kosovo's independence in February.

It's estimated that 20 percent of Kosovars are illiterate, while more than 90 percent have a minimal education. The consequences of Serbian colonial policy under Milosevic have left their mark. Kosovo's three-percent economic growth is insufficient to provide adequate employment for the new crop of young people entering the labor market every year.

According to economist Muhamet Mustafa of the Riinvest Institute for Development Research in Pristina, the black market economy is responsible for 30 to 40 percent of Kosovo's gross national product. The path up the economic ladder is as good as blocked for the country's youngest and most hopeful.

"We must keep our best people in the country, but we lack young elites," says Harvard graduate Shpend Ahmeti, who heads the Institute for Advance Studies (GAP) and plans to establish an academy for future business leaders. Kosovo's main export is still scrap metal, but Ahmeti mentions what politicians intend to ask for at an upcoming international donors' conference — a subway in the small industrial city of Ferizaj, for €36 million ($58 million), and an opera house dedicated to the now-deceased former president, Ibrahim Rugova, for €25 million ($40 million).

What embitters the idealists among international aid workers and democratic lone wolves among Kosovo's ethnic Albanians is that the UN mission tends to encourage greed, rather than a pioneering spirit. "Ninety percent of the people here come for the money," says a police official with the UN's organized crime division in Pristina. "The motivation (among UN workers) is moderate, people are constantly rotated, and we don't get the really good ones, anyway." Tours of duty in Kosovo, he says, are detrimental to careers at home.

Ten-Figure Sums and No Electricity

The UN mission is variously described as anything from a "paper tiger" to a "bureaucratic monster" to a "colonial administration," while much of its international personnel has the reputation of being in Kosovo either to pursue an adventure or for personal enrichment (From a 2007 study completed for the Bundeswehr)

In the upper management echelons at UNMIK, in the Kosovar government and in international consortiums, ten-figure sums of money are thrown around. For the planned Kosovo C brown coal heating power plant, a bidding war has reached €4 billion ($6.4 billion). The new plant is needed because the existing sections of the power plant, despite €1 billion ($1.6 billion) in investments in the power grid, can't deliver enough energy. Daily power outages last up to eight hours. Many people use diesel generators. But who's responsible for this electricity fiasco? Ethem Çeku is CEO of the current electricity monopoly. He's also the cousin of former Prime Minister Agim Çeku and has close ties to UNMIK Director Rücker. Çeku has also served as chairman of the steering committee in the race for the new €4 billion project. One of his former colleagues is part of the favored consortium, while other companies bidding on the power plant project include German energy giants EnBW and RWE.

Çeku and his lot, together with UNMIK leaders, form "a sort of Cosa Nostra for Kosovo," says Avni Zogiani, who heads the anti-corruption NGO called ÇOHU! ("Wake Up!"), despite risks

to life and limb. He has received threats because he prepares dossiers on the sins of members of parliament, and because he, to the dissatisfaction of Western ambassadors of democracy, utters sentences like: “So far, UNMIK has worked primarily with criminals and made deals with the devil, merely for the sake of stability in the country.” Zogiani’s claim, says UNMIK Director Rücker, “does not coincide with reality.”

In early April, Zogiani’s organization filed a complaint with the special prosecutor in Pristina alleging favoritism within Kosovo’s privatization agency. The accused is 39-year-old Hashim Thaçi, who, as one of the KLA commanders in the guerilla war against the Serbian army, was known by his combat name, “Snake.” He is now Kosovo’s prime minister.

Will his past matter? German author Jürgen Roth cites a 2005 intelligence study (from the Bundesnachrichtendienst) which asserts that as far back as 1999, at the time of the Serb-Albanian peace negotiations, Thaçi controlled “a criminal network active throughout Kosovo.” According to the report, he is also suspected of having hired a “professional killer.” Thaçi himself has declined to comment on these accusations. The prime minister is busy with governing and dealing with his party, the PDK. Thaçi — with the support of Germany’s left-leaning Friedrich Ebert Foundation — is trying to establish the PDK within Europe’s spectrum of leftist parties, where his old comrade-in-arms and former Prime Minister Agim Çeku also wants to build ties.

Women and Heroin

It is assumed that a corporate structure of organized crime and corruption is behind every political party in Kosovo. (The UN’s Directorate of Organized Crime)

The UN special investigators for organized crime work in a dilapidated collection of trailers on the edge of Kosovo Field (Kosovo Polje), the historic site of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo between Serbs and the Ottoman Empire. Rain echoes on the corrugated metal roofs of the trailers while the officials inside drink thin coffee. Their weary faces reflect doubt in the purpose of their assignment.

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“We are fighting with wooden swords against an extremely well-armed opponent,” says one of the investigators, who prefers to remain anonymous. “In 2005 and 2006, when the first locals were admitted into the Kosovo police, we suddenly found not a single gram of heroin. Our undercover investigators and informants disappeared. We know literally nothing since then.”

> According to law enforcement agencies, Kosovo is the most important interim destination for opiates and heroin coming from Afghanistan . It is believed that up to four or five tons of heroin are brought across Kosovo’s borders every month. The drug then reaches the EU countries through Albanian distribution rings. (Rastislav Báchora, Notes from Southeastern Europe, 2008)

The central Balkans’ drug smuggling route, under observation of police worldwide since

1999, runs through Kosovo. According to Europol, ethnic Albanian organized crime groups now control 80 percent of heroin smuggling in some northern European countries, and 40 percent in Western Europe. Officials at UNMIK in Pristina are familiar with the reports, as well as the warnings of a “further aggravation of the security situation” — now that the tiny republic’s independence facilitates access to government business for the ruling clans.

But nothing is happening. The multinational apparatus is too large, too out of control and too involved with itself. The daily bureaucracy of compiling organizational charges, sending progress reports (known as “okay reporting”) to New York, and preparing proof of activity, keeps people busy.

The UNMIK list of Kosovar brothels and bars suspected of promoting or tolerating illegal prostitution — which are off-limits for UNMIK staff — includes 138 establishments of various calibers. “Dodana,” a dimly lit bar in the divided city of Mitrovica, sits just outside the French Kosovo Force (KFOR) barracks. It’s not on the UNMIK list and, at first glance, doesn’t seem to have any prostitutes, either. But the owner is a KLA veteran who did time in a German prison near Stuttgart for drug trafficking, and it doesn’t take long for him to change his mind and say: “Come back tomorrow, and then you can get what you want.”

At the Buze Ibrit across the Ibar River, Fatmiri, who leases the establishment, offers his rooms for €5 ($8) for two-hour “relaxation” periods. Turkish, Albanian and Moldovan women are available in the bars further east along the river.

Bajam Rexhepi has himself driven past the Buze Ibrit in a Jeep every day. He’s a slim, gray-haired man who carries a Croatian nine-millimeter pistol concealed in his suit jacket. He knew Mitrovica as a coal-mining town, before there were KFOR troops, UNMIK police and the attendant brothels. He’s a former prime minister of Kosovo and the town’s current mayor.

DPA

Bajam Rexhepi, Mayor of South Mitrovica

To be more precise, he’s the mayor of South Mitrovica, the Albanian section. But his villa is across the river, on the city’s Serbian side. This puts it in the future Serbian special administrative zone. But somehow the powerful Rexhepi has managed to have his house — surrounded by Serbian neighborhoods and with a panoramic view — assigned to the Albanian south.

Rexhepi trained as a surgeon. He served as a doctor at the front during the guerilla war, and as personal doctor of KLA co-founder Adem Jashari until Jashari was murdered. After the war he went into politics. As prime minister he gained particular respect by denouncing the anti-Serb pogroms in March 2004 which killed 19 people, injured thousands and destroyed or damaged monasteries, churches and cultural sites.

The Serbian Orthodox cemetery in South Mitrovica, which is now cut off from the Serbian neighborhoods, is still seen as a memorial. Its chapel was desecrated, gravestones were disturbed and cow manure and bits of clothing scattered among the graves. But violence tends to be the exception now, says Rexhepi calmly, pointing to nearby Serbian houses. “Those people over there,” he says, “want to create parallel structures.”

The Multiethnic Future

A multiethnic Kosovo does not exist, except in the written pronouncements of the international community. (From a study by the International Commission on the Balkans)

Students at the technical university in North Mitrovica wear T-shirts reading “Kosovo is Serbia.” The administration of Kosovo’s recalcitrant north, funded by Belgrade, now resides in a small, cobalt blue house along the river. North Mitrovica is a planet with its own orbit, a collection of drab neighborhoods with apartment buildings dating back to the days of former Yugoslav dictator Josip Tito. It has shop-window portraits of Russian President Vladimir Putin and perhaps 30,000 Serbian residents, who are being used as spearheads in the struggle over Kosovo’s future.

Those who work in North Mitrovica’s hospital, court system, schools and university are paid two to three times the standard salary, as compensation for living here. By simply persevering, the idea is, they embody Belgrade’s legal claim to Kosovo. The leader of Serbia’s Radical Party, Tomislav Nikolic, is greeted like the Orthodox Messiah in North Mitrovica, with bread, salt and folk dancing. He can except to capture 70 percent of the vote in this neighborhood.

Experts from the Institute for European Politics consider the dreams of a multiethnic Kosovo a “grotesque denial of reality in the international community,” triggered by a “politically mandated pressure to succeed.” It is not difficult to reconstruct the source of this pressure.

Washington’s influence has been decisive, from the NATO attack on Serbian targets in 1999 to its leadership role in the peace negotiations in Rambouillet, France, and the road map for Kosovo’s declaration of independence. “The Spaniards didn’t want a decision before March 2008, because of their upcoming elections, but the Americans wanted February,” says a UNMIK employee. “So February 17 it was.”

The resolute phrase “no way” — spoken into a mobile phone by an official at the American diplomatic mission in Pristina — which barely prevented Kosovar Prime Minister Thaçi from declaring independence two days early (from an American perspective), is now one of the most colorful myths surrounding the establishment of the young republic. The Americans have reaped the rewards of their commitment to Kosovo: the Camp Bondsteel military base, arms deliveries for the future Kosovo army and a loyal community of fans among the Albanian majority.

And the Europeans? Javier Solana, the EU’s chief diplomat and a dedicated supporter of trans-Atlantic cooperation, did not attract much attention with his moderate appeals during the gallop to Kosovo’s independence. EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso is already suggesting that Kosovo could be offered “EU prospects.” UNMIK Director Rücker takes it a step further, when he says: “I see both Kosovo and Serbia a members of the EU in 10 years.”

What steps need to be taken before that can happen? A few bastions would have to be worn down and bridges built.

The Serbs, in their blossoming, rural landscape in the north, bordering on the wild Sandzak region, and with their fields, pastures and beehives, would have to learn to find a common language with the Albanians in the south, in their sprawling settlements of unfinished

buildings and streets littered with garbage.

The old and new residents of Prizren, at the center of the Kosovo controversy, a medieval residence of Serbian kings and the birthplace of dreams of a greater Albania, will have to find ways to reconcile once again. They will have to clear occupied houses, repair desecrated mosques and churches, and allow justice to prevail.

There are currently 38,000 pending lawsuits for the restitution of property in Kosovo — mostly fields and meadows. EU experts expect to encounter 180,000 court cases that have not been processed yet. Among 40,000 criminal cases still pending, 700 are classified as "top priority," because they lead directly into the heart of the clan system.

It is that system, and not the people, which is still the source of power in Europe's youngest republic.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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