

Kosovo's dirty secret: the background to Germany's Secret Service affair

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The arrest of three German secret service agents in Kosovo exposes the sort of society that has been developed with German and American support in this former part of Yugoslavia—one mired in corruption, organised crime and secret service plots.

The affair began on November 14, when a bomb exploded outside the office of the European Union special representative, Pieter Feith, in Kosovo's capital, Pristina. The building was damaged but no one was hurt. Immediately afterward in a neighbouring building, a German man, Andreas J., was observed and questioned by the Kosovan security forces, and unmasked as an agent of Germany's Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND, Secret Service). This is according to the public prosecutor's office. German sources, however, claim that Andreas J. only came to the scene four hours after the explosion to take photographs.

Normally, such secret service affairs between friendly governments are settled quietly and discreetly, usually by the departure of the unmasked agents. Not so in this case. Last week, the police arrested Andreas J. and two additional BND agents, accusing them of having planted the bomb at the EU's International Civilian Office (ICO) building.

The case has received enormous attention and has led to a diplomatic crisis between Berlin and Pristina. Pictures of those arrested were shown on Kosovan TV and on the front pages of the press, complete with rumours whose source was thought to be the office of Prime Minister Hashim Thaci. It was claimed that the public prosecutor's office possessed a video showing Andreas J. throwing the explosive device at the ICO building. However, various witnesses who claim to have seen the video say it is not possible to clearly identify anyone on the tape. Thaci, for his part, completely denies any involvement and says the whole affair is a matter for the allegedly independent Kosovan justice system.

Speculation has since been rife about the background to the case, but it is doubtful whether it will ever be clarified. Kosovo is a jungle of rival secret services. In this regard, it resembles Berlin before the fall of the Wall. The US, Germany, Britain, Italy and France all have considerable intelligence operations in the country, which work both with and against one another. Moreover, in this country of just 2.1 million inhabitants, some 15,000 NATO soldiers and 1,500 UN police officers are stationed, as well as 400 judges, police officers and security officers belonging to the UN's EULEX mission.

In addition, the country has a government and state apparatus that are notoriously corrupt and are closely linked with organised crime. According to a report by the Berlin Institute for European Policy, produced last year on behalf of the German army, drugs, human trafficking and arms smuggling, theft, robbery and car crime are the only increasing and profitable

sectors of the country's economy. Conservative estimates put the annual monetary turnover of the mafia at approximately €550 million. This represents a quarter of the country's gross domestic product, which is artificially inflated by enormous international transfers. Kosovo has become a "poly-criminal multifunctional region," with Kosovo playing an important role, particularly as a transit country for Afghan heroin.

The German government has denied any involvement by the three BND agents in the attack on the ICO building and called such accusations "absurd." And it is indeed difficult to discern a motive for the BND to organise an attack on an institution in which the German government is involved.

However, secret service expert Erich Schmidt Eenboom, a long-time observer of the BND, thinks differently. In an interview with *Junge Welt* he was convinced that the BND agents had committed the attack to increase pressure for a faster transition to full sovereignty in Kosovo. However, he was unable to provide any proof.

On the other hand, the question arises why the Thaci government would court an open conflict with Germany, which after the US is the second largest financial backer of Kosovo and ranks among the most important advocates of its independence.

Most German commentators describe this as an act of revenge—an interpretation that clearly originates in senior government circles. Over many years, Kosovan politicians, and in particular Prime Minister Thaci, have been angered by the BND's criticisms linking high-ranking politicians with organised crime, contrary to the position taken by the CIA.

One bone of contention was a 67-page BND analysis about organized crime in Kosovo, produced in February 2005, and reported by Frankfurt journalist Jürgen Roth the same year in *Weltwoche*. The report accuses Ramush Haradinaj (head of government from December 2004 to March 2005), Hashim Thaci (prime minister since January 2008) and Xhavit Haliti, who sits in the parliament presidium, of being deeply implicated in the drugs trade.

According to the BND report, "Regarding the key players (e.g., Haliti, Thaci, Haradinaj), there exists the closest ties between politics, business and internationally operating OC [organized crime] structures in Kosovo. The criminal networks behind this are encouraging political instability. They have no interest in building a functioning state, which could impair their flourishing trade."

Thaci is one of the founders of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and in 1999 led the Albanian delegation to the Rambouillet conference, which established the pretext for the NATO war against Yugoslavia. At this time, according to the BND report, Thaci controlled a criminal network "active throughout Kosovo." In 2001, the report claims, "there were direct contacts with the Czech and Albanian mafia." In October 2003, Thaci was "closely linked to extensive drugs and arms trafficking" with a clan that was also accused of money laundering and extortion.

The BND report says of Haradinaj: "The structures around Ramush Haradinaj, based on family clans in the area of Decani, are engaged in the entire spectrum of criminal, political and military activities, which substantially influence security conditions throughout Kosovo. The group consists of approximately 100 members and is active in smuggling arms and drugs and in the illegal trade of goods liable to customs duty. In addition, it controls local government organs."

In December 2004, Haradinaj, who was considered a protégé of the US, became prime minister of Kosovo. However, he had to resign in March 2005 because the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia indicted him for crimes against humanity. Among other things, he was accused of the forceful abduction of civilians, kidnapping, unlawful detention, torture, murder and rape. He was acquitted in April 2008 for lack of evidence, after nine out of ten prosecution witnesses died violently and the tenth withdrew his statement after narrowly escaping an assassination attempt.

The Berlin Institute for European Policy report cited above also repeats the accusations against Thaci. Real power in Kosovo lays with 15 to 20 family clans who control “almost all substantial key social positions” and are “closely linked to prominent political decision makers,” the report states.

Weltwoche summarises the results of the study, saying, “The current Prime Minister Hashim Thaci is specifically incriminated.” It goes on, “‘Keyplayers’ like Thaci are responsible for ‘the close links between politics, business and internationally operating mafia structures.’ The political recognition accorded Thaci and other representatives of the Kosovo Liberation Army has given former terrorists a previously unsurpassed authority. Former criminals have won a reputation as politicians abroad, and enjoy parliamentary immunity at home, and the protection of international law abroad. This enables them to operate largely unchallenged in Kosovo and to put pressure on political opponents with the help of—officially forbidden—party secret service operations.”

In the meantime, the influence of the mafia gangs extends to the staff of NATO’s KFOR peacekeeping force and UNMIK (United Nations Mission in Kosovo). According to Weltwoche, UNMIK is also jointly responsible “for Kosovo becoming a ‘centre of the international trafficking of women,’ particularly young and under-age prostitutes. In some estimated 104 brothels, which are mostly situated on the outskirts of town by a gas station, the ‘international’ customers are among the best. High demand has made a ‘significant contribution to the growing local trafficking structures.’ In the past, several secret internment camps for women were established.”

It is interesting that the report by the Berlin Institute for European Policy also refers to substantial tensions between German and American bodies. “The German report is particular critical of the role of the US, which had obstructed European investigations and which had been opened up to political extortion by the existence of secret CIA detention centres in the grounds of Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo,” writes Weltwoche. “Doubts are growing about the American methods and also as a result of the ‘serious’ description of a high-ranking German UN police officer that the main task of UNMIK’s second in command, American Steve Schook, is ‘to get drunk with Ramush Haradinaj once a week’.”

These tensions have obviously grown considerably, with several articles suggesting that the CIA could have played a role in the arrest of the three BND agents.

There are also still further hypotheses as to why Pristina became involved in an open conflict with Berlin. One concerns the European Union’s EULEX mission, to be expanded by the end of the year from 400 to 1,900 legal and police officers to replace UNMIK and develop Kosovo’s legal structures.

On the one hand, this disrupts the affairs of the criminal clans, which have largely been able to function undisturbed since the completely overworked judicial system faces a backlog of

approximately 40,000 legal cases. On the other hand, in order for the European Union to obtain a UN mandate for EULEX, the EU has agreed with Belgrade that the authorities in Pristina will have no control over the police and courts in the Serbian inhabited Kosovo north. Pristina sees this as a first step towards the secession of these areas and therefore rejects the agreement.

Another theory reasons that Pristina is really only interested in BND agent Robert Z., one of the three arrested, whom it claims was implicated in the murder of KLA commander Ekrem Rexha in 2000.

Whatever the case, one thing the affair of the arrested BND agents has already made clear is that the German government's first foreign combat mission in the postwar period—and the enormous sums of money it has pumped into Pristina—have helped to establish a regime that Germany's own secret service regards as a centre for the trafficking of drugs and women throughout Europe. As Jürgen Roth writes in *Weltwoche*, the Kosovan-Albanian clans are today "a leading criminal force, in particular in Switzerland, Germany and Italy."

In turn, this organized criminality serves German Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble as a pretext to curtail fundamental democratic rights and to demand new powers for the police and secret service.

Germany's Green Party bears a special responsibility for this development, justifying the return of German imperialism to the Balkans with clichés about human rights and self-determination. In reality, it is a case of economic interests and geopolitical power. The result is a completely ruined society, in which criminal and corrupt elements set the tone.

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