

KOSOVO, SERBIA, MACEDONIA, MARCH 2000: A REPORT FROM THE BORDER REGIONS

On the first anniversary of the bombing of Yugoslavia the British Helsinki Human Rights Group produced its latest report on developments in the Balkans. BHHRG representatives visited Serbia to investigate reports that a new KLA formation was conducting attacks on police and civilians in the Preševo valley near the border with Kosovo. They also travelled to Macedonia to find out how the country was coping with continuing instability in the region. Is a new war brewing in the Balkans?

Introduction

During the past few months journalists have been reporting with growing frequency violent incidents in the south western region of Serbia that borders Kosovo. NATO leaders and representatives like U.S. Secretary of State's confidant, Jamie Rubin, have warned Kosovar Albanian radicals against provoking fresh conflict while pointing the finger at Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic as the core reason for regional instability.

Serbia's south-western region contains a predominantly Albanian population and is centred in the small towns of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medvedja and surrounding villages, many of which lie in the 5-mile exclusion zone leading up to the Kosovo border. The Yugoslav Army is forbidden by last June's military-technical agreement with NATO from entering the zone, but Serbian policemen may approach the boundary with KFOR in Kosovo.

Apart from its proximity to Kosovo, the area is of great strategic importance to Serbia as it contains the only main thoroughfare connecting the country with its southern neighbours and the Greek port of Thessaloniki, the main entrepôt for commerce between the Middle East, the Balkans and Central Europe. The Belgrade-Skopje-Thessaloniki highway runs through the narrow Vardar Valley which is bounded on both sides by high mountains bordering Kosovo in the west and Bulgaria further east. Albanian-inhabited villages straddle the valley and the highway.

To many Albanian nationalists the demography of the region proves it should be part of a Greater Albania and they regularly refer to it as 'Eastern Kosova'. Since the region continues the arc of predominantly Albanian-inhabited territory around (and including) the western and northern border areas of Macedonia to the south of Serbia, the sensitivity and conflicting nature of the regional interests have led many to fear a further outbreak of violence in this part of the Balkans which could come to resemble last year's NATO-led war, or worse.

BHHRG representatives visited this area in mid-March 2000. They also interviewed people, including journalists and politicians in Skopje, Macedonia, about the situation on that country's borders with Serbia and Kosovo.

It has to be stated from the outset that this has not been an easy report to compile. While both Albanians and Macedonians were cooperative in the search for information, the Serb forces in the Preševo region, the police in particular, were unnecessarily obstructive. Without resorting to violence or pressure of a threatening nature towards the BHHRG representatives, Serb officials refused to make any statement, even of the most anodyne kind. This can only lead journalists and other observers to draw their own conclusions many of which may be inaccurate and ultimately damaging to the Serb position.

Violent incidents in the Prešovo region

On 26th January 2000, a group of men wearing black masks and uniforms bearing the insignia: UCPMB (Albanian for Kosovoan Liberation Army for Preševo, Medvedja and Bujanovac) appeared at the funeral of two brothers who were killed in the village of Dobrosin. Their relatives claimed that they had been killed by the Serb police although no one, Serb or otherwise, has yet been apprehended for the crime.

Other incidents have occurred both before and after these deaths:

- In December 1999 a bomb exploded at a Serbian school in Bujanovac and 5 meters from the police station in Preševo.
- Two weeks later 2 bombs went off in an Albanian district.
- In January 2000 the director of an Albanian school in the village of Muhovac was killed on his way to work.
- In January the heating plant in Bujanovac was blown up and a Serb policeman was killed.
- 26th February armed men allegedly members of UCPMB attacked Serb police patrol in Kocul killing one officer and injuring three others.
- 29th February Marcel Grogan a UN official was shot and wounded by Albanian guerrillas near Dobrosin.

These attacks have led to a clearly visible increase in the police presence in the region. Informed opinion says that Albanian extremists, infiltrated from Kosovo, are responsible for the violence, however, none of the crimes detailed above appear to have been solved. Albanian political representatives have documented cases of police brutality against suspects in a handful of such cases. However, as yet, ordinary Albanians do not report any kind of systematic harassment from the Serbs.

Despite their awesome reputation for dealing brutally with terrorism the Serb police themselves seem paralysed. They are fearful to enter some places in the region - the village of Dobrosin is a complete no go area for them.

KFOR also seems to be playing cat and mouse with the international bodies in Kosovo itself. When the BHHRG observers were detained in the police station in Bujanovac on 13th March they saw two UN representatives who had been apprehended for 'straying' over the border from Kosovo. This was not the first incident of its kind, nor the last. Some suspect that US KFOR troops stationed only five miles away have facilitated and encouraged the appearance of the 'new' KLA. At least until then, they had done little to impede it.

All of these things lead many Serbs to suspect that KFOR is trying to goad the police into retaliation against the suspect terrorists, thus providing a pretext for armed intervention into Serbia proper, something kept at bay during and after last year's conflict. (Even recent Western condemnations of the new KLA violence are read by suspicious minds as re-runs of Robert Gelbard's condemnation of KLA "terrorism" in February, 1998, which seemed in retrospect to "provoke" the Serbian police clampdown later used to justify NATO intervention.)

General Wesley Clark and top NATO personnel blame Milošević for the tensions in the region claiming that he intends to start a "Spring offensive". It is certainly true that police forces have been augmented with personnel brought from outside the region. The army is much in evidence: BHHRG saw and heard the VJ conducting manoeuvres near Preševo during their visit.

However, common sense dictates that the Serbs could only be the losers in any confrontation. They are surrounded by hostile regimes in Bulgaria and Macedonia while in Kosovo itself there are 50,000 troops from the world's most powerful alliance. Many local people fear that bombs could fall again if hostilities broke out. During the NATO bombing, there were several victims of unexploded cluster bombs in the Prešovo region who have lost limbs. A local team came from nearby Niš to defuse the bombs - KFOR itself has made no such offer.

Local Government

There are c.75,000 Albanians in the border region. 92% of the population of Preševo's 46,000 people are Albanian. Bujanovac's 53,000 people are 62% Albanian. In Medvedja out of 13,000, 30% are Albanian and

70% Serb. There are two main Albanian political parties: the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) and the Party for the Democratic Unity of Albanians. The former is allied to Rugova's own Democratic Party.

BHHRG visited the mayor's office in Preševo and talked to several members of the town's administration, including the deputy mayor, Naser Aziri. Out of 38 deputies 32 are Albanian and 6 Serbs. In Bujanovac the number is less - only 28% of the deputies there are Albanian. According to Mr. Aziri this electoral unit is unjustly drawn so that a deputy must collect 2000 votes as against the 100 or so that a Serb needs to be elected. They claim that Albanians and Serbs are not treated equally in the electoral units and that this has provoked hostility.

However, the region has continued to take part in both local and state Serb elections. There has been no boycott either of Serb institutions such as schools and hospitals as happened in Kosovo. Under the terms of the various Yugoslav constitutions Albanians have been accorded education in their own language. Signs everywhere in the region are in both Serb and Albanian. For example, forms in the local police station are printed in both languages. (The officer in charge of the BHHRG's detention was himself an ethnic Albanian policeman.)

This does not mean that everyone is happy. In fact, in a local referendum (unrecognised by the Serbian state) conducted in 1992 people voted overwhelmingly for territorial and political autonomy. Since then, local representatives have taken their case to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg where they were received sympathetically. The deputies seem to talk somewhat with forked tongues. On the one hand, they say that autonomy within Serbia (to European standards) would answer their concerns, on the other hand they look towards Kosovo as their *Heimat*.

In any kind of dispute, they side with their kinsmen to the west. On 5th March 1998 the mayor of Preševo, Riza Halimi, had to calm down citizens who were demonstrating against Serb violence in Kosovo. They were arrested with 5 others and criminal proceedings instituted against them are still unfinished. In Bujanovac, members of Halimi's party have been before the courts on as many as 25 occasions. Many Albanians refused to serve in the army in Kosovo during the war and have since lost their jobs.

It is probably fair to say that although there were no problems during the war people have become more dissatisfied since due to the economic conditions as much as anything else. The local officials were quick to say that their relations with ordinary Serbs was good - the state has been and is the problem. Unemployment is among the highest in Serbia. Out of the whole population only 1000 are employed in state factories. After the Kumanovo agreement a VJ battalion moved from Orahovac to Preševo and took over a local shoe factory causing 250 workers and management to lose their jobs. Machines were stolen and DM3.5m. worth of damage done to the factory. 95% of the town's state officials (judges, police) are Serbs. Things are even worse in Bujanovac where 100% of the town's officials are Serbs.

It was also claimed that educational facilities for Albanians are inferior. Text books have not been updated and are improperly translated. There is a lack of teachers in important languages like English and French. They also complain that degrees from Priština and Tirana are not accepted in Serbia. As many teachers have left to go to Kosovo they will soon be left without any because the massed international organizations and NGOs pay vastly better for their language-skills than the local authorities.

The town had just received a visit from Jiří Dienstbier the UN's special human rights rapporteur for the former Yugoslavia. In particular, the assembly members asked him to intercede with Belgrade for them to have a local radio station, forbidden so far. Anything broadcast by people in Preševo itself could not be more inflammatory than Radio Television Kosovo which screens a diet of KLA propaganda at all times of the day and night.

Local People

Preševo itself is a bustling, typically Albanian town with numerous small shops and businesses. It seems sad that the Albanians who are so commercially adept want to return to work in obsolete state factories. However, BHHRG visitors to Kosovo have noticed the same thing: a desire to be re-hired in the smoke-stack industries now that the Serbs have gone. Bujanovac, on the other hand, is a more depressed and depressing place where tensions seem to exist barely beneath the surface. However to suggest that either place is "empty" and that no one dares to go out at night (as some journalists and Kosovan radicals have done) is totally untrue.

According to local Albanian officials, between 400 and 500 young men went from the region and fought in Kosovo during the war - some have stayed behind in places like Gnjilane, just over the border. There is obvious admiration for the KLA among the young and a desire for the region to be part of Kosovo. People are able to visit the province whenever they want - around 1000 locals are reported to have found jobs there with the various international organizations and KFOR.

Inevitably, the proximity of the American KFOR troops in their luxurious base at Camp Bondsteel makes Kosovo seem like the land of milk and honey to them. The realities there - lawlessness, violence, lack of electricity etc. don't register. For an outsider, the Preševo region (with all its problems) seems to function much better.

BHHRG travelled to the last Serbian police check-point before the five mile exclusion zone and Kosovo proper. Over a three hour period at least one hundred people came and went through it, including Serbs who feel safer shopping in Preševo than Kosovo. There were no obstructive searches and the atmosphere between locals and police seemed correct. Neither did they, as some journalists have claimed, demand money for the cross-border journeys. No one interviewed in Preševo itself made such accusations. Some credit should go to the police here for most of them had been ethnically cleansed from Kosovo in June 1999 and might have adopted a more aggressive approach.

An Albanian-language school near the checkpoint still functions, two buses carrying young children left around one o'clock. This somewhat belies the statement that no one lives in this area any longer. We passed a small hamlet of four or five houses. Two of them were badly damaged. Local Albanians claimed that this was the village of Bujic which (they said) had been "ethnically cleansed" recently. What precisely happened at this small hamlet during the fighting late last year is impossible to say.

Albanians claim that large numbers of people have left the region. On 9th March Kosovapress reported a "wave" of displaced people leaving Preševo and the village of Bujic. They say 30,000 Albanians have left. On 10th March, Hashim Thaci claimed that refugees have been "forced to leave Preševo, Bujanovac and Medvedja": "Belgrade is using a prepared scenario and has begun ethnic cleansing" he continued. According to Miroslav Filipovic, writing for the *Institute of War and Peace Reporting* police terror in southern Serbia has forced thousands to seek refuge in Kosovo". *Rilindja* in Pristina claimed on 16th March that Albanians were arriving in Kosovo on a daily basis testifying "to the wild terror there". Apparently, UNHCR say they have received testimonies of harassment, beatings and demands for money.

Conclusion

The situation in the Preševo valley has obviously radicalized sharply in the past three months. Prior to that, whatever the complaints made by local Albanians, they were not totally unopposed to remaining in Serbia. Relations remained good even during the war. Despite the fact that 25,000 Albanians fled to Macedonia to escape NATO's bombs, not one of their houses had been ransacked by neighbouring Serbs during their absence.

Violent attacks and deaths of both Serbs and Albanians have obviously taken place over the past three months. Nevertheless, Kosovan Albanian leaders like Thaci have likely exaggerated the severity of the situation as well as the number of Albanians forced to flee the region. Some observers claim that the violence is, anyway, orchestrated by the KLA. On 12th March in Niš Dienstbier said "I think that the incidents in Preševo are being organized in Kosovo".

The Serbian authorities should be more open about the problems they face in the region. International media have become much more critical about the KLA activities in the past few weeks and even NATO spokesmen have warned it against "losing international sympathy." Belgrade is not taking advantage of this 'window of opportunity' to explain its position on the region. Without such an explanation journalists and other observers will draw their own conclusions aided by a well-oiled Albanian propaganda machine. The Serbian authorities should also aim to get more Albanians back into the state structures - like the courts and police - while there is still some good will.

The result of the war has left the local Albanians much worse off economically. This has led to many young people, in particular, seeing their future in or with Kosovo. Their belief in a successful future for the province may turn out to be misplaced. They, like many ordinary Kosovars, could be drawn into a life of black marketeering or, worse, forced to join the many Kosovars who have sought refuge in Western Europe. While

it is difficult for the Serbian government to create jobs at the moment, there is an argument for paying special attention to the Preševo region. It is insensitive and counter-productive to close factories in a place like Preševo, especially to re-house the Yugoslav army.

While NATO's politicians deny any wish to export the Kosovo scenario elsewhere and warn the KLA not to escalate the violence a US spokesman has gone on record as saying that "atrocities" could change all that and, presumably, lead them to intervene. If this was to happen military support could easily come from friendly regimes in neighbouring Macedonia and Bulgaria. It is, no doubt, with this in mind that the Serbs have located so many police and military personnel in the area.

The Macedonian Dimension

Macedonia's status has been precarious since the small republic declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1992. At first, the threats came from Greece which was enraged by the country's use of both a name and symbols viewed by Athens to be fundamentally Greek.

However, since the election of the present government in October 1998 relations have improved - complaints about symbols like names and flags are now muted. Macedonia has become a key player in the West's Balkan strategies. Not only did the country take in hundreds of thousands of Albanian refugees during the Kosovo crisis, it was also the forward station for NATO operations before the liberation of the province in June 1999. This has meant, effectively, that Macedonia is little more than a Western protectorate in the eyes of many local people.

This was best demonstrated in the presidential elections held last autumn. Massive cheating was recorded, particularly in the second round of voting, to enable the West's favoured candidate Boris Trajkovski to win. All foreign election observers admitted seeing numerous cases of fraud perpetrated by Albanian supporters of Mr Trajkovski's political allies living in the west of the country. The losing candidate of the Social Democratic Party, Tito Petkovski, was perceived as being more attuned to the old structures in the Balkans and less likely to respond to Western interests particularly if they conflicted with local needs.

The role of the Albanian minority in perpetrating the fraud has left a residue of bitterness in Macedonia. Albanians make up 23% of the country's population and their rights are protected by elaborate provisions in the country's constitution that international agencies have praised on many occasions in the past [See BHHRG report **Macedonian Minorities, 1994**]. Nonetheless, radical Albanian politicians continue to seek more rights from the central government.

The Albanian community lies along the western border with Kosovo spreading eastwards along the border with Serbia, south of the sensitive Preševo region. Politically, the region has been split between the left - the Albanian Party of Prosperity (PDP) and the radical, nationalist Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) led by Arben Xhaferi. This party ultimately seeks complete equality and autonomy for Albanians in the Macedonian state. The 1998 election produced an unlikely coalition government made up of Macedonian nationalists - the Internal Revolutionary Party (VMRO) and Arben Xhaferi's DPA. The government has cooperated remarkably well considering the seemingly polarized agendas of the two parties.

Both during and since the Kosovo crisis Xhaferi's followers have cooperated with the KLA and politicians in Albania itself. It is common knowledge that he is one of the prime movers behind demands for a Greater Albania. Based in the town of Tetovo, Xhaferi has extended his control over the west of Macedonia. Cooperation across the border with Hashim Thaci's supporters in Kosovo is very close at political, economic and even quasi-criminal levels. Mr. Thaci owns property in Tetovo. The DPA and Thaci's Kosovo supporters now seem politically indistinguishable. Should violence break out between Serbia and the KLA (plus possibly NATO forces in Kosovo), many Macedonians fear that their country would implode and split in two. Albanians would join Kosovo proper and the rest of the country would be forced into the arms of its eastern neighbour Bulgaria where many people think it, historically, belongs despite widespread hostility to the idea among Macedonians themselves.

Present Tensions

BHHRG has observed both the 1998 parliamentary elections and 1999 presidential election in Macedonia [See BHHRG reports: **Macedonian Parliamentary Elections 1998, Macedonian Presidential Election**

1999]. Representatives visited Skopje and Tetovo in March 2000 to investigate how the present tensions in Kosovo and south-western Serbia were affecting the country. Even though Macedonia is still far from meeting the admission criteria for entry into the European Union it is being encouraged by Western institutions to adopt many of the economic policies demanded by the EU elsewhere as part of the standard accession strategies. Radmilla Shekerinska of the opposition SDMS outlined some of these developments.

For example, former state factories are being closed down - she predicts that by the end of June an extra 15,000 people will be out of work. Among the closures will be textile factories that have, in the past, arranged viable contracts with Western partners, particularly in Italy. Petrol prices are rising due to the increasing cost of oil on world markets, but also because the country's oil supplies are in the hands of Greek companies. Macedonia's tobacco industry is being run down though this has not affected the widespread availability of locally-produced counterfeit Western-brands of cigarettes, though it reduces the income of the state from taxes on legal brands.

VAT is to be introduced at 19% (an exorbitant rate for a poor country) on 1st April which will lead to huge inflation and social hardship. The winding down of state-provided health care will only compound the problems people are likely to face. Sales of land to foreigners will be allowed, leading to the destruction of the country's agricultural base - Macedonia is self-sufficient in food at present. And, the churches (and mosques) will get back land confiscated in the Communist era. Shekerinska predicts that such restituted land will be resold as the religious orders will be unable to properly utilize it.

All of these problems are only compounded by the present state of lawlessness in the country. Criminal activity in the Balkans has exploded since the Kosovan crisis erupted and, after Kosovo itself, Macedonia has been most affected. In a nutshell, the Albanian-majority regions of the country have become virtual no go areas for local law enforcement agencies. Villages along the border with Serbia and Kosovo are havens for mafia-controlled smuggling and drug dealing. At the beginning of the year 3 Macedonian policemen were killed as they tried to investigate a suspected smuggling operation in the village of Aračino. The case remains unsolved. 2 months ago someone with a hand-held rocket launcher attacked a police station in Kichen. In Tetovo itself a recent attack knocked out the electricity supply. Again, no one has been apprehended.

Tetovo

Although Tetovo's population is about 40% Macedonian, it is perceived as an Albanian town. It is common knowledge that it is outside the control of the authorities in Skopje. Arben Xhaferi's DPA appoints all local police chiefs. Large, expensive cars are parked in the town many with number plates from other places in ex-Yugoslavia - like Slovenia or Croatia - where there are large Albanian communities. It comes as no surprise to learn that many Macedonians are leaving.

A source from a small TV station in Tetovo, TV Kiss, has observed the radicalization of the town at first hand. It does not only affect Macedonians. The source claims that many young Albanians are pressurised by the DPA, for instance, to enrol at Tetovo's controversial university where the curriculum is based on that used in Tirana and Priština, not Skopje. A degree from Tetovo is not recognised by the state authorities. It also costs DM 500-2000 per annum to study there. Not all local Albanians are happy with these developments - during the war some sent their sons to Serbia to prevent their mobilization into the KLA.

According to the source, the regional weapons market is run from Tetovo. Menduh Thaci, a DPA official controls not only many of the town's shops but the region's black market, including the black market in oil. Of course, none of this could happen without collusion from the Macedonian authorities. The VMRO leadership is perceived as corrupt, many of its leading members being in cahoots with the Albanian mafia.

The media in Macedonia

There are a variety of newspaper outlets in the country representing different political views. However, an employee at the state newspaper *Nova Makedonia* told BHHRG that there was now pressure on opposition newspapers. Last November, the Group visited the opposition paper *Utrinski Vestnik* which was strongly critical of the conduct of the presidential campaign. On a visit there on 14th March the staff seemed wary and unwilling to criticize the authorities or discuss the chaotic state of law enforcement in the country.

A new media law is before parliament which, if adopted, will impose draconian fines on journalists and reporters who infringe its provisions. Inevitably, it will affect the smaller media outlets the most. Kiss TV operates in Tetovo without too many problems, although at the equivalent of £10,000 per annum, a licence to operate is very expensive for the station. During the war, Kiss lost 40% of its advertising revenue because the DPA told local businesses not to advertise with them. One cameraman claimed to have been personally beaten up by Hashim Thaci during the bombing in April last year.

TV is controlled by the state. Small stations exist but they operate in a perilous environment. The source at Kiss TV says that the station's cables were cut when they revealed the extent of the fraud in last year's presidential election. In effect, 2 out of 3 state channels are broadcast in the Albanian language and Kiss TV predicts that there will soon be more television in Albanian than Macedonian.

If Albanian criticisms of alleged limited access to media and education in their own language were frequently investigated by foreign NGOs after the mid-1990s, then the issue of Macedonian language rights especially in areas politically-dominated by the DPA seems to be emerging on the agenda.

Conclusion

There have already been large demonstrations in Macedonia against the government's economic policies. Many observers predict that unrest in the country can only get worse. However, creeping poverty can cause apathy and alienation rather than unrest. Neighbouring Bulgaria is in economic free-fall; people's standards of living have steadily declined since the collapse of Communism. However, there is next to no public protest against the policies of the Bulgarian government. Weakened by 45 years of Communism and 10 years of 'reform' many people in the Balkans and elsewhere in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have given up hope of change.

But if the relationship between the population and state structures in county's like Macedonia has broken down, it is the mafia that will occupy the empty space. There is every indication that this has happened. The effect of the Kosovan war has been to empower such people as never before. Several possible scenarios present themselves for Macedonia. There is talk of the country being eventually divided between a Greater Albania in the West and Bulgaria to the East. This may be the intention of some Western policy makers. But for the cross border political mafia, represented by the DPA and Thaci, the present fluid situation with regard to state borders is perhaps preferable. The current chaos in Kosovo combined with the unclear legal position in north-western Macedonia and the probability of further outbreaks of violence - including between Serbia and KFOR/KLA on Macedonia's northern and western borders - offers some the prospect of more political power and personal prosperity than any clear-cut resolution of the situation.