

Tensions Are Mounting in Kosovo

By JAMES PETTIFER

PRIZREN, Kosovo—Below the Byzantine castle walls of Prizren, it is just about possible to imagine here that the old Yugoslavia is still in existence. It is Kosovo as seen through the eyes of the Dayton negotiators. In the agreement signed last autumn in Ohio, there was nothing included about this troubled province with its 90% ethnic Albanian population, governed under emergency laws from Belgrade since 1989. With tensions rising, the local Serbs, who make up most of the rest of the population, are beginning to feel uneasy. And despite the international community's hopes, whoever wins the Albanian parliamentary elections this Sunday will probably not be able to restrain their Kosovo kin if the current situation leads to more violence.

Kosovo was a multicultural, multiracial and generally peaceful place. The communities do not mix much, nor do they love one another. But they never did—it is not Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic's fault that mixed marriages are almost unknown. But earlier this month five Serb policemen were cut down in a hail of bullets in the village of Decani, along with two Bosnian-Serb refugees. Decani is a poverty-stricken 100% Albanian rural community nestled under the mountains near the border with Albania. Responsibility was claimed by a previously unknown ethnic Albanian underground group based in Switzerland, where there is a large Albanian diaspora community. It is the first retaliation of its kind from the Albanian population, who deeply resent the Serbian martial law. It has changed the local political atmosphere in fundamental ways.

Serbs who have lived for generations in the Kosovo capital Pristina were fearful last week, quiet and subdued in their little cafes and restaurants, sitting drinking slivovitz under portraits of Chetnik heroes. There is only one Serb for every nine Albanians in Kosovo now, with the largely Muslim and

Catholic Albanians having over twice as many children as the average Serb. Dragan Markovic is a teacher, and in his spare time he trains with a gun club.

It is almost certainly linked to one of the paramilitary groups in the region run by alleged war criminals like Arkan, but he refuses to discuss that. He is more concerned about a general strategy of community defense.

"What do we do?" he asks. "We are so outnumbered, and how do we face a long terrorist campaign? I think it would be better to have a war if we have to. Many of the Albanians would leave and go to Albania. It would not be like the Kraijinas, other Serbs would help us."

That may be the case but what Albania has to offer in the way of a solution to the intractable problems of Kosovo is hard to discern. It is an awful long way from here to the capital in Tirana, with its diplomatic community and growing bustle and prosperity. Albania is in the throes of a parliamentary election campaign where the future of President Sali Berisha is on the line. He was elected in 1992, and over the last four years has followed a radical free market policy that has made him the darling of the IMF and World Bank, but left the infrastructure of the country in difficulties and a growing gulf between rich and poor. His critics accuse him of authoritarianism, and see his re-election as opening the way to a right-wing dictatorship. Supporters see him as having decisively broken the hold of 50 years of communism on the nation.

In the eyes of the international community he has been a restraining influence on the Kosovars, but it is hard to see now how his re-election will make much difference to events on the ground. In the formal sense, he has certainly been a moderating influence on the Kosovar leadership, but with the beginnings of an armed underground, the calculations of constitutional leaders, Serb or Albanian, will be fundamentally affected. The angry and bitter young men in the diaspora communities in Switzerland, Germany and the U.S. who see violence as the only way forward are very unlikely to bother much with the Tirana

government, any more than the provisional IRA has ever taken instructions from Dublin governments. International bodies such as IFOR in Bosnia are equally impotent to influence developments.

They see Kosovo as having been sold down the river at Dayton, and the Ohio agreements as a kick in the teeth for the moderate and responsible policy the Kosovar leadership, under Ibrahim Rugova, has followed in the last few years. The Serbian military administration in Pristina has refused to allow the Kosovo parliament to meet in the last four years. A certain kind of Albanian patience has simply run out, inside and beyond Kosovo. Young Albanians in Kosovo itself did not bother to hide their satisfaction at the Decani shootings, although the older generation were much more circumspect, with keen memories of the efficiency and ferocity of Belgrade repression of Kosovo uprisings in the past.

The shootings and general rise in political tension have provided very unwelcome new problems for both Mr. Rugova in Pristina and Mr. Milosevic in Belgrade. The official Kosovar line is that the shootings were a Serb provocation, but virtually no one outside the Rugova public relations office believes that. The existence of an armed underground, run from the diaspora but using Albania as a safe base, has been rumored for some time. In response, the Kosova Serbs are looking for action and leadership from Belgrade, at a time when the Bosnian crisis and Serbia's economic woes are taking up most of Mr. Milosevic's time.

Yet he cannot write off the Kosovo Serbs—as he did the Croatian Serbs—without threatening the heart of his own political identity, and that of all Serbs, who regard Kosovo as the heart of their state. The great medieval Serbian religious monuments, such as the Patriarchate at Pec and the church at Gracanitsa, are all in Kosovo. Taking control of the local party and exploiting the grievances of the Kosovo Serbs were central to Mr. Milosevic's rise to power in the late '80s. On the other side, Mr. Rugova's moderation is under severe pressure from the growing radicalization of the young. Whatever the details,

it looks as if Kosovo is in for a long difficult summer.

The only hope for the international community is that some sort of negotiations between the parties on the restoration of democracy in Kosovo might start and make progress and take the wind out of the radical ethnic Albanians' sails. But with attitudes hardening on both sides of the ethnic divide, it seems a distant hope.

Mr. Pettifer is a writer specializing in the southern Balkans. His "Blue Guide to Albania" has just been published.

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