

Kosovo in Crisis: Caught between The Snake and the *Zajednica*

On a cold February night in Pristina, thousands are camped in Skanderbeg Square. Opposition protesters have erected a tent-city, hoping their presence will force an end to the political drama that has paralyzed Kosovo over the past six months. The hastily organized effort began on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, ahead of a February 25<sup>th</sup> vote in the Kosovo Assembly to elect a new president. Kosovo's opposition have used teargas inside the Assembly 8 times in the past six months (Plesch, 2016), and many opposition protesters have had violent clashes with police. Most are in the square to express their dissatisfaction with Kosovo's long list of shortcomings: endemic poverty, rampant corruption, and organized crime. However, absent from their demands is an understanding of how this all began. The crisis in Kosovo is a self-induced wound—years of political cover for The Snake and rejection of the *Zajednica* have brought the country to its knees.

Economically, Kosovo is in trouble. It remains the poorest country in Europe, while boasting an estimated 45% unemployment rate—nearly 60% for those under 24 (Trading Economics). It also has the youngest population in Europe with an average age of 25 (Invest Kosovo). The University of Pristina's 47,000 enrollment is a disaster for a country with nothing to offer graduates (KIESA). Many of them spent those cold February nights in Skanderbeg Square.

Since November, nearly 50,000 Kosovo Albanians have sought asylum in Germany (Alexander, 2015). Most will be sent back as Germany considers Kosovo to be a safe country in comparison to Syria or Iraq. Absent from the political dialogue is the toll this takes on Kosovo's international reputation—Kosovo is not a member of the

Schengen (visa-free) EU travel regime, and many European nations continue to resist extending membership due to the large amount of Kosovo Albanians waiting to break down the door. This dire economic situation is not new; it has roots in the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution that granted autonomous status to Kosovo.

The 1974 Yugoslav Constitution granted increased autonomy to Kosovo and Vojvodina, then provinces of the Serbian Republic within Yugoslavia. After years of repression by Aleksandar Rankovic, the Albanians were now in control of Kosovo. Immediately, the University of Pristina was founded—the university at the time was a satellite campus of the University of Belgrade—and Albanian language instruction and history courses flourished. However, this proved to be counterproductive as increased instruction in and use of Albanian led many students to neglect learning Serbo-Croatian (the official language of Yugoslavia). Most students took courses in Islamic Art or studied at the new Faculty of Albanology, while only around 20% studied science and technology (Vickers, 199). Miranda Vickers concluded: “Albanians searching for work in other parts of Yugoslavia often had difficulty getting jobs because of the language barrier, their relatively low level of technical and professional experience, and the basic prejudices they encountered throughout the country” (Vickers, 185).

In 1981, these frustrations resulted in a violent riot by students. They complained of cramped living conditions, poor food in the dormitories, and an overall lack of economic opportunity. Many of these grievances were legitimate—some students were forced to sleep two to a bed due to limited space. The University of Pristina had an enrollment of 36,000 with 18,000 others in various extension programs throughout the province, but the university was built to accommodate only a third of that number

(Vickers, 197). Kosovo's ratio of students was the highest in Yugoslavia, as one in three residents was enrolled in some kind of educational program (Vickers, 197). Kosovo cultivated a generation of Albanian folklore experts that would morph into nationalists with very little effort.

Unfortunately, violence was not only directed at provincial authorities. Many Serbs and Montenegrins were beaten, and had their homes or shops burned and looted (Vickers, 197). Crucially during this period, Serbs began to leave Kosovo. An explosive birth rate, discrimination by Albanian authorities, and an influx of Albanians from Albania took the Serb proportion of Kosovo from 24% to 10% during the period of 1961-1991 (Kuperman, 2008). Two parallels exist between the 1981 riots and today: an abundance of college graduates with no economic prospects, and an intense dislike for Serbs stemming from a dangerous brand of Albanian nationalism.

From the opposition's view, 2015 was a disastrous year for Kosovo: it was denied membership in UNESCO, the government signed agreements with Serbia and Montenegro, a court was established to prosecute Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) members for crimes committed during the 1999 conflict, and Kosovo was also denied Schengen Area travel throughout the European Union. Vetevendosje (self-determination) is the main opposition party, and hold around 15% of seats in the Assembly. Many of their representatives, including leader Albin Kurti, have been arrested for various acts of political violence and aggression during the crisis. They rose to fame following the Serbian withdrawal from Kosovo with their slogan "Jo negociata, Vetevendosje" (No negotiations, self-determination)—implying there should be no territorial partition or settlement with Serbia.

Vetevendosje, like most far-right parties in Europe, oscillates between subversive nationalism and outright xenophobia. They complain that the border demarcation with Montenegro is an affront to Kosovo's sovereignty—and decried the creation of a court for KLA fighters. But, as one might suspect, the most pressing issue on their agenda is the existence of the tiny Serb-minority in Kosovo. In August, Foreign Minister Hashim Thaci completed a EU-brokered deal with Serbia paving the way for the creation of the autonomous Association of Serbian Municipalities (known as *Zajednica*, the Serbian word for “association”). Of course, the *Zajednica* is nothing new, and was enshrined in Kosovo's declaration of independence as stipulated by the Ahtisaari Plan. In an interview with Vice News, Albin Kurti was clear about what he sees under the bed—the Serb boogeyman:

I think it is better to have 30 minutes of teargas, than 30 years of 'zajednica' Serb majority municipality organization...this government cannot have peace with us and with Serbia...we are not opposing the rights of the Serbs, our activities are not against Serbs, but our activities are against expansionist ambitions of Serbia (Hanrahan, 2016).

While alarming, these statements are tame for Kurti and Vetevendosje. The suggestion that Serbia would make a territorial grab after opening EU accession chapters is laughable and has no basis in reality—isolating Kurti and Vetevendosje as insincere political actors.

Additionally, in early March, Vetevendosje claimed credit for overturning a truck carrying Albanian language textbooks to Kosovo from Serbia. Kosovo insists the textbooks should have been distributed to Albanian children living in Serbia's Presevo Valley, but Serbia rejected them due to their content. The textbooks refer to Kosovo as an independent country—something Belgrade refuses to recognize (Collaku, 2016). While

preying on the insecurities and prejudices of his fellow Kosovars, Kurti and his followers fail to recognize the harm done to Kosovo's international reputation.

The deal with Serbia was part of the "Belgrade-Pristina dialogue", aimed at normalizing relations between Kosovo and Serbia. When discussing the *Zajednica* agreement, Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz told Kosovo officials: "there is no other alternative" (Turkish Weekly, 2016).

Kosovo remains a quasi-state as it has failed to garner full recognition from the United Nations or European Union. Five EU member states (Spain, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Cyprus) do not recognize Kosovo—complicating prospects for European integration. After Thaci's defense of the *Zajednica* deal, he lashed out at news of no Schengen-area entry for Kosovars: "I consider it a grave provocation and a result of the incompetence and lack of political will of the Brussels leadership. It is a direct insult to the citizens of Kosovo" (Isufi, 2016). This drew a sharp rebuke from Austrian MEP and Kosovo advocate Ulrike Lunacek, "Protests and negative sentiments toward the EU make it much more difficult for me and other supporters of Kosovo to work on a positive image, which is much needed to finally grant visa liberalization" (Isufi, 2016). The irony of this situation is rich: Kosovo's population needs the ability to travel freely throughout Europe in search of work, but can only do so by making concessions to the Serb minority—something they haven't been interested in.

While the protesters do not harbor warm-feelings for Serbs, most realize that a minority population dwindling at around 5% is not an existential threat. Their goal was to deter the election of a new President, Hashim Thaci. Of course, he was the Foreign

Minister who brokered the unpopular *Zajednica* deal. But, Thaci's involvement in the crisis is much deeper.

Better known as "The Snake", he is a former KLA guerilla leader from the hard-line Drenica region of Kosovo. He emerged as the political spokesman of the group, and was a major diplomatic player during and after the war. He was, after all, Kosovo's first Prime Minister.

On his first official visit to Washington in 2012, he candidly explained his plans for reconciliation with the Serbs in Kosovo: "There will be no territorial swap, there will be no autonomy, no special favor...there will be only integration" (Butler, 2012). Again, the irony of him brokering the deal to give Serbs autonomy is overpowering. In Spring 2011, Dick Marty, a Swiss member of the European Parliament introduced a report on organ trafficking allegations during the conflict with Serbia. Hashim Thaci was named 27 times in the report, which pointed to many senior politicians and political operators within Kosovo (BBC, 2010). The reaction in Kosovo was righteous indignation at an affront to Kosovo's status as an independent country. An investigation into the allegations led to the establishment of a court to prosecute KLA members.

So why are Kosovars finally realizing Thaci is a problematic figure? For five years they have lauded his efforts to achieve international recognition, while ignoring the organized crime syndicate he oversees. They've defended him against horrific allegations, and justified his role with the KLA—but are now willing to cut him loose.

Besa Luci of "Kosovo 2.0" argues:

The issue of image particularly strikes home hard, considering Kosovo's ongoing struggle to achieve greater recognition in international forums...the [Marty] report has materialized into the premise upon which

the Specialist Court is about to be established, and the public outcry has shifted toward using it as a stick with which to beat Thaci. (Luci, 2016)

Many protesters are indeed using the allegations as political ammunition against him, but their evolution on this issue is disingenuous. Every Kosovar knows exactly who he is—these allegations hardly caught anyone by surprise. What is surprising though, is how quickly they believe they can distance themselves from him. Joe Biden referred to him as the “George Washington of Kosovo” (Schmidle, 2013), and he has been the face of Kosovo Albanian politics since 1999. If anyone in Kosovo has political juice left, it is The Snake.

The crisis is a result of the refusal to institute the *Zajednica*, and The Snake’s shrewd political maneuvering. For years, Kosovars have blamed Serbia and the Serb-minority for their shortcomings. But, now, as the streets are lined with young, disillusioned Albanians—the culprits are staring each other in the eye. Those who supported The Snake and the rise of Kosovo’s mafia state are guilty—as are Kurti and Vetevendosje, who sow hatred and intolerance that harm Kosovo’s image. Kosovo’s future is the European Union, but that will not be realized until there is a coming to terms with both The Snake and the *Zajednica*.

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