

Kosovo Dispatch

Final Status Quo

BY JEREMY KAHN

SEVENTY-YEAR-OLD Svetislav Jovicič sits in the noonday sun on the dusty steps of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Orahovac and laments what his life has become. He used to own a winery in the lush green hills surrounding this south central Kosovo town, a place his ancestors have lived for more than three centuries. As a younger man, he played for an amateur soccer club, earning the friendship of many of his ethnic Albanian teammates. “For many, many years in Orahovac, everyone lived very well with Albanians,” Jovicič says.

But now, his winery is gone, destroyed by the Albanians who seized the land six years ago. His Albanian soccer buddies never visit anymore. Today, Jovicič lives as a virtual prisoner in the tiny warren of garbage-strewn streets that make up the town’s Serbian enclave. Located just uphill from Orahovac’s town center, the enclave’s border with the surrounding Albanian neighborhood is demarcated by rolls of barbed wire that can be used to seal off the tiny ghetto in the event of ethnic violence. On a number of occasions since 1999, Albanians here attacked Serbs and their property. During major ethnic violence in March 2004, two Serbian Orthodox churches in nearby villages were burned to the ground. “Recently, it has been mostly peaceful, but it is not safe to go down,” Jovicič says. He and other residents of the Serbian enclave fear they will be attacked if they wander into the town center. “They say it is open for free movement, but that is not the reality.”

The reality is bleak. Jovicič complains that there are no jobs for his children here; Albanians refuse to hire them. He subsists on the 40 euros per month he receives from international aid organizations. Faced with such conditions—and with the occasional waves of ethnic strife—many of Orahovac’s Serbs have left, moving to new homes and new lives in Serbia. Once, the town had a Serbian population of more than 2,500. Today, 500 at most remain—all of them living within the enclave, guarded day and night by a contingent of Austrian soldiers.

The Austrians are part of a 17,000-man NATO force that continues to keep the peace in Kosovo seven years after a NATO bombing campaign drove the Serbian military out of the province. Since then, Kosovo has been administered by a U.N. special representative, although the province has remained technically a part of Serbia. U.N.-brokered talks currently underway in Vienna between negotiators from

Belgrade and Pristina are supposed to decide the province’s “final status” by the end of the year—that is, whether it remains a part of Serbia, becomes its own state, or is offered something in between. While Serbian President Boris Tadić has proposed “more than autonomy, less than independence” for the breakaway province, most observers believe the negotiations will result in an independent Kosovo. When that happens, one of the most significant pieces of unfinished business from the 1990s humanitarian interventions in the Balkans will be concluded—but only on paper.

In the United States, the American-led intervention in Kosovo is widely perceived as a success, especially by liberals who are fond of contrasting it to the mess President Bush has made in Iraq. NATO went to war in 1999 to end a brutal campaign of repression and ethnic cleansing against Kosovar Albanians launched by then-Serbian President Slobodan Milošević, in which at least 10,000 Albanians were killed. In this, the NATO campaign succeeded. But ending Milošević’s reign of terror was not the only goal of NATO intervention. For the last seven years, the United States and the international community have invested billions of dollars in Kosovo in the hopes of building a peaceful, democratic, and multi-ethnic society. “Failure to secure a multi-ethnic Kosovo would be a failure of our efforts over the last six years, and indeed, the last decade,” Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns told a congressional committee last year.

Yet this multi-ethnic dream remains almost as distant as it was on the day NATO forces arrived. Freed from Serbian oppression, Albanians—who make up about 90 percent of Kosovo’s 2.2 million people—have taken revenge on their Serb neighbors. They killed at least 1,000 Serb civilians during and in the immediate aftermath of the NATO bombing campaign, and, since then, as many as 100,000 Serbs have been driven from their homes. Those that remain, such as Jovicič, live in ghettos, their movement and ability to work severely restricted. Meanwhile, in northern Kosovo, which still hosts a large Serb population, ethnic Albanians live similarly precarious lives. Following the last major spasm of ethnic violence in March 2004, an uneasy calm has descended across Kosovo. Mainstream Albanian politicians, conscious that continued ethnic strife would hurt the chances for independence, say pleasant things about building multi-ethnic institutions and protecting the rights of the Serb minority. Beneath the surface, however, darker political currents swirl.

ALBIN KURTI DOES NOT look like a dangerous man. With his tousled brown hair, Elvis Costello glasses, and faded blue sweater, the 31-year-old sitting in the lobby of Pristina’s Grand Hotel sipping a macchiato could pass for a typical Williamsburg hipster—or at least the talented computer science student he once was. But, to hear some tell it, Kurti poses a grave threat to Kosovo’s future as a peaceful, multi-ethnic state.

Kurti is something of a cult hero to the worldwide Alban-

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ian diaspora. As a student at the University of Pristina in the late '90s, he led an underground movement that organized sit-ins and other nonviolent demonstrations against Serbian control of the university. Sporting long hair and a mustache (think Yanni), he quickly became a recognizable face of opposition to Serbian power in Pristina. He later worked as an assistant to Adem Demaçi, the political leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), the guerrilla group that was fighting to liberate the province from Serbia. During the NATO bombing campaign in 1999, Serbian police arrested Kurti. When Serb forces withdrew from Kosovo that summer, they took him and other Albanian prisoners with them. Kurti was held largely incommunicado for nine months and endured savage beatings at the hands of his jailers. Almost a year after his initial arrest, he appeared, hair and mustache shorn, in a Serb court, where he was tried and sentenced to 15 years for subversion and conspiracy to commit terrorist acts. "Free Albin Kurti Now!" became a rallying cry among ethnic Albanians from Pristina to San Francisco. T-shirts and posters were printed with the slogan, and rock concerts were held to support the cause. International pressure for his release mounted, but with Milošević still in power in Belgrade, Kurti remained in a cell. Only after Milošević's ouster did his successor, Vojislav Kostunica, finally let Kurti go in December 2001.

Back in Pristina, Kurti now leads Self-Determination!, a movement that claims thousands of supporters in 17 cities and towns throughout Kosovo. Self-Determination! is opposed to the U.N. presence in Kosovo and also to the final-status negotiations. "People don't want status, they want freedom," Kurti tells me. He argues that independence should not come through a negotiated settlement with Serbia—which, he says, has shown "no remorse, no repentance" for its persecution of Albanians during the '90s—nor through U.N. decree (a possible outcome if the Serb negotiating team walks out of the talks, as some think likely). Instead, he wants to hold an immediate referendum of Kosovo's citizens. "A referendum is democratic. The current situation is not democratic," he says. "The [U.N. special representative] makes a decision with four or five people and that decides the fate of 2.2 million people. What is democratic about that?"

Kurti says he has no problem with the Serbian community in Kosovo—"we are fighting a system, not the people," he says—but he talks in paranoid tones about Serbia's continued designs on Kosovo. He speaks darkly of "50,000 spies—Kosovar Albanians—here working for Serbia." And he accuses the Serbs of using the final-status negotiations to continue Milošević's campaign of ethnic cleansing. From a blue folder he carries with him, Kurti produces a set of maps and points to areas where he claims Serbia is trying, through the final-status negotiations, to resettle Serbs. "They are trying to surround Kosovo Albanians, and they will be a backdoor for Serbia to seize territory," he says. He thinks Serbia wants to partition Kosovo. (The United States, its European allies, and Russia have all said that par-

tion is not on the table.) "This will bring war! This will bring violence! We want to stop this," Kurti says, pointing emphatically at his maps.

Kurti claims to be a fervent believer in nonviolence. And so far, Self-Determination!'s "actions," as he likes to call them, have indeed been peaceful. Kurti and his followers have held numerous protests outside the U.N. headquarters in Pristina, surrounded the compound with yellow tape reading CRIME SCENE—DO NOT CROSS, blocked access to the compound with bales of hay, trashed U.N. flags, and spray-painted slogans on the compound's walls. Just last week, Kurti and more than 80 supporters were arrested for protesting outside the U.N. compound; Kurti got ten days in jail. They have also tossed rotten eggs at the motorcades of Serb politicians when they have visited Pristina. ("Here you do this and they call it radical. In Palestine, it would be ridiculous," Kurti says.) But some of Kurti's actions have moved in a more sinister direction.

ON APRIL 14, Kurti led a demonstration of several hundred people in the western Kosovo town of Decani, blocking the entrance to the U.N. offices there to protest the U.N.'s decision to designate 800 hectares surrounding Decani's Serbian Orthodox monastery a "protected zone." Nestled amid the verdant woods beneath the snow-capped Prokletije mountains, the Decani monastery has stood for centuries as an important touchstone of Serb culture, even as the Serbian population in the surrounding countryside slowly withered away. Here, beneath the elaborately frescoed walls of the monastery's chapel, lies the fourteenth-century Serbian saint King Stefan, his body allegedly preserved, as in life, through some supernatural force. And here, in front of the altar, hangs a massive bronze chandelier that, according to local myth, was smelted from the armor of the soldiers who fell in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, the ancient defeat that still haunts Serb memories and shapes their self-conception as the noble defenders of Christendom against the Islamic invaders from the East.

The monastery, which has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is a tempting target for Albanian extremists because of its symbolic import. Even though the monks there sheltered Albanian families during Milošević's ethnic-cleansing campaign, the monastery was mortared during fighting in 1999 and 2000 (although the church itself survived practically unscathed). During the March 2004 ethnic unrest, mortars again fell within the monastery walls, and Albanian rioters attempted to march on the place; they turned back after local Albanian leaders pleaded with them to stop. Today, the monastery is guarded by Italian soldiers, who escort the monks in armored vehicles whenever they leave the monastery grounds. The United Nations designated the land around the monastery a protected zone to prevent logging and development of the monastery's land, where a restaurant has already been illegally constructed. "We are just trying to protect the environment around the

monastery,” says Father Sava Janjić, the monastery’s ginger-haired spokesmonk, sounding like a Sunday morning public radio host with his perfect English and mellifluous, high-pitched voice.

But that’s not how Kurti sees it. He accuses the United Nations of granting Decani and other Serbian Orthodox monasteries “extra-territoriality.” And, at its Decani rally, Self-Determination! was joined by Avdyl Mushkolaj, the head of the KLA Veterans’ Association, known for its radical positions and for violent demonstrations against the United Nations, as well as by members of Balli Kombëtar, an extreme Albanian nationalist party dedicated to the creation of a “Greater Albania” that takes its name from a World War II-era organization allied with the Nazis. These groups are linked to past atrocities against Serb civilians. U.N. officials also believe that these extremists may have been responsible for assassination and kidnapping threats against U.N. staff in Decani last fall. It is Self-Determination!’s growing alliance with such elements that has set off alarm bells. “[Kurti] is moving ever closer to building a brown-shirt organization,” says one longtime observer of Kosovo’s politics in Pristina. “He personally adheres to nonviolence, but he marks the target for others.” As long as there are extremists willing to stoke ethnic grudges, Kosovo will remain a powder keg.

KURTI’S RHETORIC CERTAINLY seems to resonate in Decani, where freshly hung posters pay homage to KLA martyrs and where the safe zone around the monastery has stirred resentment even among moderate citizens. Such anger has Kosovo Serbs worried, but they’re not in a position to do much about it. Following the March 2004 ethnic violence, most Kosovo Serb politicians withdrew from Kosovo’s government in protest. They boycotted the province’s October 2004 elections, and they chose not to send representatives to the final-status talks in Vienna, allowing Belgrade to negotiate on their behalf. The Serbs thought this would reinforce their position that Kosovo is an unseverable part of Serbia. But it didn’t—and now, they’re less able to advocate for their interests, which are not necessarily the same as Belgrade’s. “The message to the [Kosovo] Serbs must be clear: Don’t expect others to resolve your problems. You must participate,” Father Sava says. “You can’t expect the clock to be turned back ten years, as if it were just a bad dream.”

Mainstream Albanian politicians say they would welcome a greater Kosovo Serb presence at the bargaining table. “The Serbs are always an object—an object of negotiation, an object of discussion. And they should become a subject,” says Veton Surroi, a Kosovo newspaper owner who now heads a political party called ORA. “Everyone is negotiating on their behalf except the Serbs themselves.” Hashim Thaçi, a former KLA leader nicknamed “the Snake,” was once known as an Albanian hardliner. But even Thaçi, who now leads Kosovo’s main opposition party, the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), tells me that he favors an affirmative action program

to bring Kosovo Serbs into government positions, the police force, the army, and other civic institutions. “They are citizens of Kosovo,” he says. “It is their homeland, too.” Thaçi adds that he is in favor of granting Kosovo’s Serbs dual Kosovar and Serbian citizenship and giving Serbian communities a large degree of municipal autonomy. “But, unfortunately, my impression is that [the Serbs] will be hesitant to be included until final status is resolved,” he says. (And perhaps with good reason. Despite Thaçi’s statements about protecting minority rights, local PDK members in Decani joined demonstrations against the monastery there and signed Kurti’s petition, with its inflammatory claim that the monastery enjoys “extra-territoriality.”)

The integration of Kosovo’s Serbs into a new Kosovar society has been complicated by Belgrade, which has continued to fund parallel public institutions in the Serbian parts of Kosovo, particularly in the region north of the Ibar River, which divides the city of Mitrovica, an area where about a third of the remaining Serbs in Kosovo now live. Albanians driving through this area remove their Kosovo license plates for fear of attack, and Albanians walking down the main street in North Mitrovica risk being pummeled. A similar situation has developed in Strpce, a Serbian town in southern Kosovo. Belgrade pays for Serbian-language schools, health clinics, media, and—in violation of U.N. resolutions—even a police force and judicial system in these regions. The International Crisis Group (ICG) has identified these parallel structures as a potential long-term danger to Kosovo’s future as a unified, independent state. “If certain municipalities were put together into a region with Belgrade’s support, would that be used as a lever with which to create a separate entity?” asks Alex Anderson with the ICG’s Kosovo office.

Perhaps the most dangerous scenario for Kosovo, however, is an end to final-status talks that does not result in independence. Then, the likelihood of Albanian-on-Serb violence will skyrocket, according to international observers. In fact, the March 2004 ethnic riots, which may have begun spontaneously enough, are widely believed to have been fueled and prolonged by Albanian politicians who used the conflagration to pressure the international community to move toward final-status talks.

Even if Kosovo gains independence, most Albanian politicians and international diplomats in Pristina envision NATO troops remaining in the country for years in order to safeguard against ethnic violence and protect Serbian Orthodox religious sites. But that may not be enough to reassure Serbs in enclaves like Orahovac. Jovicić, the former winemaker and soccer player, says that, if Kosovo becomes independent, he will simply leave. “Kosovo is not Albania, it is part of Serbia,” he insists. “After all of that which history has brought us, it will be impossible for us to stay.” Jovicić says he doesn’t buy the assurances of Albanian politicians that Kosovo can become a multi-ethnic society. And there are plenty of reasons to doubt. Then again, if all the Serbs leave, Kosovo will never have a chance to find out. ■