

The Forgotten Refugees

Rroma Foundation

March 2001

1. Recent Developments in Former Yugoslavia

With the election of Kostunica as President of the rump of Yugoslavia and with the subsequent fall of the Milosevic regime, confirmed by the elections of December 2000 in Serbia, where the opposition won, for many, the wars were to come to an end.

Democracy was and is the buzz-word for all who speak about that region. This democracy is meant, in a very short time to eliminate all problems; to see warring factions live peacefully together forever after. Of course, since all problems in the region are to be solved by this emerging democracy, refugees that have swarmed over Western Europe in the last ten years are to return to a safe and solid future in their regions of origin.

But what does reality have to do with this halcyon view of the recent developments in former Yugoslavia. Let us have a short look at the current situation as well as to the recent actions of those factions that have fuelled the war for almost ten years.

In Kosovo, even though the so-called moderates won the elections, the violence against minorities continues unabated, in full view of the KFOR and the UN in charge – at least officially – of the security of that region. Needless to say, this did not prevent several attacks, often deadly, such as the recent bombing of a bus escorted by the KFOR against Serbs. Of other minorities, the press is usually less informed or even maybe does not want to speak. Rroma, here used as a general term encompassing all Rroma groups,

Arlji, Gurbeti, Ashkali, Egyptians and many more are but seldom even mentioned by the press. But they are nevertheless still expelled from their homes, killed, raped, and when the press covers their fate, they often say they were Serbs or even Albanians.

Even the self-named Rroma presidents who advocated – prior to the elections in Kosovo – the return of Rroma to the region are by now begging for asylum in whatever country wants to take them.

This so-called peaceful situation is unfortunately spreading across borders. The buffer zone – a five miles deep zone in Serbia meant to protect Albanians from the exaction of the Serbian paramilitaries has been overcome by the former UCK, called in this region the Liberation Army of Bujanovac, Presevo and Medvedo.. This ragtag army is far better armed than the few Serbian policemen patrolling the region and the exaction for which the UCK became infamous, namely the eviction of minorities, the killings and the rampant criminality has spread into Serbia proper. The KFOR watches but does not do anything, at least as of now.

These incursions, in turn, have led to a hardening of the Serbian stance in cities such as Bujanovac. Albanians are viewed with suspicion, and Rroma, as they identified themselves most closely with the Albanians are the first victims. Bombs, evictions, loss of work, nothing is spared. This is compounded by the fact that the Albanians want to get rid of the Rroma.

Worse, the guerrilla is spreading to Macedonia. In the last few days, the press has been full of reports of fights between the Macedonian police and Albanian “rebels”. In view of the high Albanian minority in Macedonia, especially in the North West of that country, one can only ask how long Macedonia will be able to contain these incursions. In Macedonia, the equilibrium between Slavs and Albanians has been precarious, to say the least and any fights is bound to inflame passion, with the usual result in the

region. And should one look at the recent history, several countries are claiming the region. The Greek, as Macedonia was once Greek – rather the other way around, as Phillip and Alexandre were Macedonian and not Greeks; the Bulgarians, as Eastern Macedonia was once Bulgarian and the Macedonian language is considered in that country as a Bulgarian dialect; and finally the Serbs themselves, who have not forgotten some of their dreams of Yugoslavia, all are claiming Macedonia or parts thereof.

Montenegro has nearly vanished from the news. Ever since the election of Kostunica, the fate of that Yugoslav republic did not interest the press, and the Montenegrin President Djukanovic and his aspirations to independence are by now a thorn in the Western world diplomacy. The Kosovo war and the Nato intervention have left huge scars in that country. First, many refugees have settled there, in conditions that are not worthy of the international community. Second, the country is divided between the pro-independence and the Serbian loyalists. What happens there is anybody's guess.

At least – or so say some – in Bosnia, all has become normal again. A closer look at the recent developments there give another less harmless impression. The Croats have decided to separate themselves from the Federation with Moslems that was put in place after the Dayton agreements. In the Republika Srpska, extremists, some of which are subject of indictments from the tribunal in the Hague, have won elections. In brief, none of the agreements signed in Dayton have been put in place. Refugees cannot return to their homes, co-operation between the various ethnic groups in the “official” government is non-existent. And the SFOR watches. The SFOR even watches known war criminals going for drinks in restaurants.

What of Roma? Well, they are neither considered to be Croatian, nor Serbian, and even though to a large extent, they are Moslems, they are not considered to be Moslem Bosniacs. Hence, they are the last to obtain

housing, jobs, needless to say - for who would like to employ a Gypsy – are not available, and worse, no one wants them there.

At least, or so will say some optimists, Croatia and Slovenia are stable countries where everything is more or less democratic. While this is certainly true for Slovenia, Croatia is still a quagmire. Nationalists they were, and in spite of the death of Tudjman and the election of the opposition, little has changed. This can be seen in the reluctance of the Croats in delivering known war criminals to the tribunal in the Hague or the outcry in the streets as some Croats were recently condemned.

2. Rroma: Is there a Future for them in the Region?

So the Rroma, these very Rroma whose ancestors settled in Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, Thrakia and Bulgaria nearly one thousand years ago, these Rroma who were by far the most integrated in the society, being farmers, doctors, lawyers, workers, these Rroma are by now expelled by all and have but few possibilities to remain.

As usual, we use the term of Rroma for all groups that are found in the region, from the Arlii, the Gurbeti, the Arabajdji, the Ashkali and many more. They are all Rroma, or, as the Albanians say, Madjups.

Of the 200'000 to 300'000 Rroma in Kosovo, all but a handful have fled. Those who remain have only one thought: To leave as soon as possible, for they risk their lives, their daughters are raped, their houses are confiscated or burnt. This violence continues even in the countries where Rroma have found refuge as they are threatened, even beaten up by ethnic Albanians.

In South Serbia, the situation of Rroma is currently becoming dramatic. As earlier in Kosovo, the Serbs view Rroma as Albanians, for the Rroma in the region are overwhelmingly Moslems, with Albanian names and speak

fluently Albanian. This identification of Rroma to the Albanian cause has already been their nemesis, and the Serbs did persecute them even more severely than the Albanians. Now that many Serbs from Kosovo have been expelled and have found a refuge in South Serbia, Rroma are evicted, threatened, beaten up by the police, in brief, all is done to expel them.

On the other hand, Albanians do not consider Rroma as Albanians. In fact, their large minority constitutes a problem. Adding the Rroma in the equation, together with Serbs and other minorities such as the Turks, the Goranis etc. and the Albanian majority melts like snow under the sun. Their actions against Rroma are even more violent. Under the “justification” that Rroma collaborated with the Serbs in Kosovo, they are threatening them, beating them up, throwing bombs at them, raping their daughters, in brief the whole palette of activities that we already saw in Kosovo proper. And in this case, the Serbian police watches, as the actions of the Albanians go into the direction that they themselves are aiming for. In brief, they let the Albanians do the dirty job, but do not prevent these exaction.

But what of Macedonia? Contrary to Kosovo, where Rroma were extremely well integrated, in Macedonia, the situation is less rosy. There are so-called mahalas, settlements where Rroma live such as the Shutka near Skopje, where the Favellas of Rio are almost luxurious in comparison. And in Macedonia, one finds an explosive mix between Slav and Albanian nationalists, leaving little room for the integration of the Rroma community.

Montenegro, with almost no industry and no prospects, at least currently of a stabilisation of the situation is already burdened by many refugees, quite a few of them Rroma. This is never a good omen to have a poor country harbouring many refugees of another ethnic group, an ethnic group that is very much despised there.

3. Their Fate as Refugees

So, Rroma fled and are continuing to flee the region. Should the situation in Macedonia deteriorate, one can expect an even larger wave of refugees. But what expects them? First, in many cases, the western governments do not recognise their plight. One cannot quite blame them, for what politician does want to say to its electorate “we are going to take 100’000 Rroma refugees”. In many countries, without proper information of the population as to what the Rroma in the region really are, this would be suicidal.

The second attitude is to recognise at least that they are threatened in Kosovo and surrounding regions, but to amalgamate them with the other minorities from the region.

In any case, while in some countries, the Rroma got a reprieve, that is are allowed to stay, at least for a while, they are in a precarious situation. They all know that there is no way for them to return. Even with the presence of the KFOR, the security of the few remaining Serbs is not guaranteed. What then of Rroma?

So these Rroma are here, among us, are allowed to stay but do not know for how long. Governments always find new ways to question the validity of their asylum. Are they really Rroma? They never did say so when they arrived, they said they only spoke Albanian... And anyhow, they were peasants, lawyers, school-teachers and who has ever heard of a Gypsy having such a profession? These mostly borderline racist comments are often read or heard in many countries. Once cannot but ask whether the same comments would be heard about another minority, say Jews?

This situation has by now endured for several years, as many of the Rroma were refugees as were the Albanians prior to the Kosovo War. Many of

these Roma would like to be able to work. For work is what they do, but the law is such that on a temporary stay, one cannot work. One needs the refugee status. So they are idle, something that the local population resents. For the local population works and sees strangers, refugees, who do nothing the whole day while they have to work.

What would be the solution? In view of the fact that in the foreseeable future, Roma have absolutely no chance of returning to either Kosovo or South Serbia, they should be granted a status that allows them to lead a normal life, to finally be able to raise their children in dignity and to have a future, a future that was denied to them in the last few years.