

MACEDONIA - A NEW RROMA EXODUS?

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I. MINORITIES IN MACEDONIA

Since the beginning of the War in Macedonia, nearly not a day has passed without the press reporting new actions by the Albanian extremists, and the ensuing escalation by Macedonian Slavs. From these reports, one often gets the impression that Macedonia is divided among Slavs - usually called simply Macedonians in the press, and Albanians - even though many of them are also Macedonians. But what about other minorities? For minorities there are. Rroma, who form a substantial part of the population, be they Moslems or Orthodox, Turcs, Serbs, Greeks, Bulgarians who are also present, albeit in lesser numbers.

So what of them? Well, Rroma, since their arrival in the Balkan around the turn of the first millennium have settled en masse in present Day Macedonia. This place is and always has been, besides Epiria (Kosovo and Albania) and Thrakia (Bulgaria and European Turkey) one of the most densely Rroma populated region. Alone in the Shutka in Skopje, a de-facto Ghetto, there are between 30'000 and 50'000 Rroma.

But, as usual, in many places, Rroma prefer not to declare themselves as such. They prefer to be Albanians, Turks, whatever, but not Rrom, which, in view of the prevailing discrimination that exist against this minority in former Yugoslavia is a natural survival tactic. Adding to this, quite a number of Rroma do speak Albanian, or Turkish, a result of their adaptation to the environment and the fact that all Rroma always have two mother tongues: theirs, Romanes, and the prevailing surrounding language.

So, in the press, one usually hears that Albanians form ca. 30% of the population and it is often suggested that the "rest" forms a homogenous Macedonian population. However, conservative estimates by various NGOs as well as by the Yugoslav Government (before its collapse) put the percentage of Rroma at around 10%, that is, at a number that oscillates between 150'000 to 250'000. These Rroma are from various groups, such as Arlii, Gurbeti, Džambazi, Bugurdži, Kovači as well as a wealth of other subgroups and, in the current statistics that appear in the press, for a non negligible part of what is deemed the Albanian minority. This is especially true of Rroma who do not speak Romanes anymore, as the so-called Ashkali, who have been de-facto assimilated to Albanian by not so well informed journalists.

II. THE CURRENT SITUATION: A WELL KNOWN PATTERN

1. The Pattern

That Ashkali declare themselves as Albanians is not a new fact. It already happened in Kosovo. Why is that? Well, one has to go back to the situation in Kosovo prior to the War and at the beginning of Milosevic's repression against Albanian Nationalists. In that country, the Serbs were officially the largest minority. This was not true. Rroma - all the groups confounded -

formed a larger minority than the Serbs. So the old adage of divide and conquer was applied. Rroma were astutely divided in Rroma (that is, mostly Gurbeti and Serbian speakers), Ashkali (non-Rromanes speaking) and the rest, Rromanes speaking and culturally Albanian leaning. This did not happen overnight and some Rroma politicians played the game. The Albanians, on the other hand, had an interest to show that they formed the majority of the Kosovo population. Again, this was not quite so. Only by coercing many Rroma and Ashkali to declare themselves to be Albanians - especially during the last official population count - did they achieve this goal. Some of these Rroma were really forced to declare while some were anyhow leaning towards the Albanian cause, feeling the same Serbian repression against them as if they were Albanians. In fact, there were Rroma in the UCK.

This pattern seems to have started in Macedonia. Rroma are - as witnesses told us - gently told in towns like Tetovo, that it might be better to declare oneself as Albanian. What will follow is most probably the same as what happened in Kosovo after the Nato intervention. Rroma will then become Rroma again and will be hunted down, their houses and property seized or burnt, and we will be in front of a second Rroma exodus from the Balkan.

2. One Example: Tetovo

To some, these dire predictions may seem far fetched. But this already happens in towns like Tetovo - officially a nearly Albanian town. In that city, the "frontline" between Slavs and Albanians follows the main street. Below the street, the Macedonian soldiers have set up their positions. Albanian guerrillas are located above the road, in the houses at the foothills. From these positions, they are harassing the regular army.

But who actually lives above the road? Well, in some parts it is a purely Ashkali quarter while in other, it is a mostly Rroma part with some isolated Albanian houses. So what strategy do the Albanian use? They usually shoot at the Macedonian army and police from the gardens of Rroma houses. That way, these houses are the ones that are damaged by the returning fire. In other cass, they simply confiscate - as we were reported - the houses, loot them or use them as quarters for their troops. So, when one sees destroyed or damaged houses in that part of town, chances are that these were not Albanian but Rroma houses. Already ca. 40 such houses were damaged or destroyed. In addition, these Albanian guerrillas simply loot houses, extort money from Rroma or force them to provide them with food.

In yet another facet of the pattern that has already been applied in Kosovo, Rroma are strongly urged to sell their houses. One will ask, why buy if you can simply take the houses over? Well, property deeds are sometimes useful, especially so if the situation does not evolve in an outright civil war. So, Rroma are fleeing.

For example, there are currently ca. 60 Rroma families from Tetovo in the lakeside resort of Dojran, plus a few singles and invalids. Needless to say, they are not receiving any help from either the international community nor from the Macedonian government. Othe families have gone to relatives, mostly in the already overfilled Shutka in Skopje. A lot are already thinking about fleeing the country.

3. The Future?

That this pattern is not limited to Tetovo but can be found in other towns and villages on the frontline or in Albanian hands should not surprise anyone. One can thus ask whether there is a chance that the forthcoming disarmament of the Albanian guerrillas will improve the situation of the Rroma in the region. In addition, Macedonian Slavs show an increasing streak of nationalism. We know what will then happen. For Macedonian Slavs, Moslem Rroma with Albanian names will simply be considered as being Albanians. While for Albanians, they will simply be Madžups - Gypsies and one can count on Albanians to actually force them out. After all, in many cases, these are the same Albanian commanders as the ones who already "cleaned" Kosovo from Rroma.

III. ACT RATHER THAN REACT

This leaves precious little room or time for the international community to react. For it is better to react now than to deplore yet another round of ethnic cleansing and another wave of refugees in Western Europe. But what can be done? In fact, a lot could be with just a little will and a little help.

The will to actually enforce the agreements that were actually agreed between the factions and the will to guarantee other minorities their rights, be they in regions with an Albanian or Slav majority. This has not been the case so far in the various Nato / UN interventions in former Yugoslavia. Refugees cannot return to their homes in Bosnia - in spite of the Dayton agreement, Nato in Kosovo cannot guarantee security for remaining minorities and, recently had to deploy many soldiers to allow some Serb families to return to their village. In view of this, there is only the hope that pressure will be applied on both parties, especially in view of the will of Macedonia to join the EU so that the worst can be avoided.

Journalists should also take their responsibilities. So far, no articles on the situation of Rroma in Kosovo has appeared, although this minority is sometimes mentioned in that context. But without a general awareness that a problem exists and needs to be resolved, there are few chances that anything will happen at all.

Finally, help is needed. help for refugees who otherwise might take their chances in Europe, help to the Macedonian Slavs and Albanian refugees to return to their homes, help in the form of projects to improve both the situation of Rroma, the level of civil society in that country and combat the increasing cleavage along ethnic lines which, as Bosnia and Kosovo have already shown leaves Rroma with no other choice but to leave their country.