

Kosovo Serbs: Little Protection And Less Aid

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Most Kosovo Serbs living in Kosovo today are preoccupied with their own fears, losses and fury, and cannot understand Albanian suffering. As the societies separate further, misery on both sides only grows.

"Be it Rugova, be it Milosevic, I don't care," insists 70-year-old Novica Vostic, a Serb from Kosovo. "I want my house back--and those of my brothers' too."

Compelled late last June to leave his native village of Jelovac, Novica now lives together with his wife and two sons as refugees in a rented room in Klina to the west of Pristina. From late April until the end of June last year, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) undertook a series of offensives and took control of nearly 40 per cent of Kosovo. Serbs who lived in the villages under KLA control left their homes--sometimes of their own free will and sometimes forcibly, after their closest kin had been abducted and their houses surrounded and attacked with small-arms fire.

Novica's two brothers, both of them elderly men, were abducted in the fields near his house. That evening, from the hills surrounding Jelovac, KLA soldiers launched an attack on a dozen Serbian families from the neighbourhood. By the next afternoon, the families had left Jelovac, fleeing on tractors and still under fire. A few days later their houses were burnt down.

Nearly two months later, Serbian police entered Jelovac and burned nearly all the Albanian-owned homes. Thus, this village, just like Opterusa near Orahovac or Pantina near Vucitirn, became a symbol of this war: abandoned-with plundered houses, burnt-out shells with only chimney stacks left standing.

Novica is a typical Serb from Kosovo. He is fluent in Albanian, has friends among his Albanian neighbours, and has no one in Serbia proper with whom he could seek shelter. Yet, he admits how uncomfortable he felt when his good neighbour, an Albanian, arrived after the Serb offensive in Jelovac and started to cry over the burnt remnants of his house.

The majority of Serbs living in Kosovo today are preoccupied with their own fears, losses and fury. This prevents them from having insight into the suffering of Albanians. The Serbs from the villages have fared the worst. They have found temporary shelter in rundown hotels and guesthouses. The Serbian regime will not publicly admit that it has failed to protect them; consequently it does not support them. They have been left to oblivion. An estimated 15,000 Serbs have fled villages for towns in Kosovo since the beginning of open conflict in spring 1998. They have received no state aid.

Serbs have been departing from Kosovo since World War II. Serbs who left Kosovo a couple of decades ago often claim that they did so under pressure from their Albanian neighbours. Probably closer to the truth is to say that they headed north to Serbia proper for economic reasons. Meantime, the high birth rate among the ethnic Albanian community has meant that those Serbs who stayed behind have made up an ever-shrinking minority within Kosovo.

It is within this context, that as Serbia's president in the late 1980s, Slobodan Milosevic exploited the Kosovo issue to whip up Serbian nationalism and establish his own reputation as Serbia's strongman. Speaking to the Serbian community in Kosovo Polje in 1987, he uttered his now infamous words: "No one is allowed to beat you."

Since Milosevic abolished Kosovo's autonomy in 1990, Serbs have continued to leave - and the authorities have largely ignored their departure. Belgrade seemed more concerned with "sorting out" the Albanians in Kosovo--through beats in prisons, searches of Albanian houses, expulsion of Albanian children from school

buildings and the sacking of Albanians from their jobs. Serbs close to the ruling Socialist Party of Serbia took over all offices in the state institutions, leading to a kind of apartheid.

By the outbreak of fighting last spring, it is commonly assumed, there were some 180,000 Serbs in Kosovo, less than 10 per cent of the population of the province. Having taken all the places in the state institutions, they stole from influential Albanian businessmen and used the proceeds to build houses in Serbia in readiness for their eventual departure from Kosovo. Many of the more skilful co-nationals have already moved into the newly built houses across the border. Those Serbs who were left outside this "redistribution" of capital and political power now have nowhere to go. But they also do not feel they can stay in Kosovo.

Serbs in Kosovo fear the KLA if they stay. But they also fear that they will share the fate of those Serbs from Croatia, or Sarajevo, who found that Serbia proper offered them no welcome when they went "home"-as refugees. For the moment, they are thus relying on the Serbian police--who exercise terror over the Albanians and from whom they expect protection.

There is hardly a Serbian household in Kosovo that did not rush to send one of its members to join the ranks of the Serbian police. The police in turn armed Serb civilians in Kosovo. Their Albanian neighbours know this. They also know that some of these people have taken part in the plundering and burning of Albanian houses.

The longer Serbian police violence lasts, the more difficult it is for Albanians to have a Serb friend or to ask after the fate of any abducted Serb neighbour. The amount of misery, insofar as it can be measured at all, is disproportionately greater on the Albanian side. But the level of individual misery is the same.

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