

Montenegro Makes the Most of the Fortunes of War

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A small town on Montenegro's border with Kosovo has become a paradise for smugglers and a blessing for the Kosovo Albanians desperate to buy back the passports and cars they lost in the spring. Meanwhile, there is a roaring trade in construction materials

Fighting has continued on the territory of the former Yugoslavia for seven years. However, away from the conflict there is another reality, summed up in the expression: "War brings misery to some, fortune to others" (literally "War to some is war, to some a brother").

Nowhere is this more evident than in Rozaje, a small, predominantly Muslim, Montenegrin town on the border with Kosovo with a population of 18,000.

The smuggling elite of the Balkans has been gathering here for several months. The illegal trade in second-hand cars is flourishing. Passports are in great demand as well.

According to international assessments, the Yugoslav paramilitary and the local Serb population confiscated about 100,000 passports, and as many cars, from Kosovo Albanians during the spring offensive. The majority of passports and cars are believed to have ended up in Serbia and Montenegro.

The multinational armed forces arrived in Kosovo at the beginning of the summer, after the NATO airstrikes. About 700,000 Albanian refugees returned at this point, many without documents or transport.

Almost every Kosovo Albanian family has at least two or three members working in the West. Many Kosovo Albanians want to go to the West and are prepared to pay an enormous amount for a passport. They have no problem reaching Rozaje, a town that accepted several thousands of them during the refugee crisis.

Friday is the day for the car and passport trade. Several hundred used cars with Montenegrin, German, French, Austrian and Swiss licence plates, can be found in the parking lot of the car market. Prices range from 2,500 German marks for a 1989 Golf 2 to 20,000 marks for a 1998 Cherokee jeep.

One of the salesmen estimates that at least a quarter of the cars there have been stolen from Western countries, and a quarter from Kosovo. The Montenegrin police have announced that they have confiscated over 500 vehicles of dubious origin over the last three months. However, many believe that the figure is inflated. In reality, the number amounts to only several dozen.

It is believed the Montenegrin authorities are encouraging the trade in cars, just as they do the cigarette trade. At the same time they are making money themselves and securing work of sorts for thousands of the unemployed.

Jashar Maliqi, a Kosovo Albanian from Pec, came to buy, as he put it, "a good Mercedes". He tells me: "Even though cars have licence plates and everything looks like it's in order, I know that many have been stolen. But, that's why they are cheap. Still, I am a little wary - I could be stopped in Kosovo by the car's owner and then there'd be trouble." Maliqi admits that there have been a number of such cases.

Maliqi also admits that he would like to buy several passports. He refuses, however, to buy a passport with

a Serbian coat-of-arms and a Serbian name, explaining: "With a Serbian passport, you need a visa for all countries. I would pay 2,000 marks for a Bosnian passport, and 3,000 marks for an Albanian one."

In an instant, an Albanian acquaintance of his appears with a Bosnian passport. They greet each other cordially and Maliqi hands him two 1,000 mark banknotes.

The manager of the car market, Dzemo Kuc, says that Albanians from Kosovo are the only buyers. They buy about 150 cars a day. He does not talk about passports, saying only that they are sold as well, but that this is not under his "jurisdiction". Nonetheless, he does say that a Serbian passport is worth several hundred marks at most.

A Kosovo Albanian from Vucitrn, Selim Ganca owns up to trading used cars for years and says that not even the war in Kosovo has spoiled his relationship with friends from Montenegro.

He knows that many cars were stolen in Western Europe or in Kosovo, but adds that he is not interested in that. Nor does he appear ruffled by the fact that members of Interpol will soon join the International Civilian Mission in Kosovo. One of their tasks will be to track down stolen cars.

"The Serbs took our legally bought cars away from us. Interpol should first take them away from them, and then control the Albanians," he said, raising his voice.

After a seller and a buyer agree a price, they sit down together in a car, and drive to the Montenegrin-Kosovo border crossing, Kula, on Mount Zljeb. Italian soldiers from KFOR are on duty there. At the very crossing, the Albanian pays the agreed amount and then takes over the car. The seller returns by taxi.

One local Muslim taxi-driver says that he has driven several hundred sellers back over the past several months. When asked whether he dares to drive further on into Kosovo, the driver shakes his head. He claims that it is still very dangerous, especially for those who do not speak Albanian.

Several kilometres away from Rozaje is a restaurant called Crnjo. Kosovo Albanians, Serbs from Serbia, Montenegrins, Croats, Bosniaks and even Slovenes get together there. Among them, as in the car market, only one law is in force: the law of the Deutschmark. The restaurant's owner says that more deals are struck in the restaurant every day than in the Serbian and Montenegrin Chambers of Commerce.

Passports can be bought at the restaurant, but other goods are much more popular. Hundreds of trucks parked in front of the nearby Montenegrin police and customs point testify to this.

According to official data from the International Red Cross, over 120,000 homes were destroyed or seriously damaged during the war in Kosovo. Most of them belong to Albanians. Now they are in a hurry to reconstruct their homes before the first snow falls and are turning to the producers and private transport companies from all parts of former Yugoslavia in their search for construction materials.

Simultaneously, in a never-ending line of trucks, with license plates from all over the Balkan, humanitarian aid is being brought to Kosovo. And, owing to numerous restrictions imposed by the Serbian government, the cargo transit towards Kosovo is going through Rozaje.

One policeman says that at least 300 trucks pass through the Kula border crossing every day. The Montenegrin customs service separated from the federal customs service several months ago and is no

longer paying money to Belgrade and Milosevic's people. Custom duties are being levied for each item that goes into Kosovo except for humanitarian aid. The tariff is the same for everything: 4 per cent of the value of the goods.

"It's not a lot, about DM400. In Serbia, they would take our money and soul!" says a Bosnian Serb with a truck loaded with wooden planks.

When asked how he dares go to Kosovo, he laughs and then says it's "business the Balkan way". He explains: "I bring a truck to the border at Kula where a buyer, an Albanian, takes it and drives it to Kosovo, where it is unloaded. Then he returns with the truck and the money. I trust Albanians. Every Serb who has done business with them at least once in his life will confirm this."

A Croat from Zagreb, who transports humanitarian aid from Italy, overhears him and adds: "This is the first time I have envied a Serb. I have to drive all the way to Pristina, and he stays here and drinks his beer." Sighing, he confesses that he does not find the trip through Kosovo in the least bit pleasant.

Over a hundred small workshops have opened to process wood in Rozaje over the last four months. Obviously, Kosovo is an attractive market.

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