

Radicals Test the Ground in Drenica

Author: [Muhamet Hajrullahu](#)

In the old heartland of the KLA a new paramilitary force is trying to win support.

The dirt track roads that lead to the valley next to Kosmaq hills in central Drenica have changed little since 1997, when the area first became guerrilla terrain and the birthplace of the Kosovo Liberation Army.

Apart from the disappearance of numerous Serb army checkpoints that were stationed here in the Milosevic era, and the fact that the village of Bajice is now called Rezistence, life in these parts has not altered.

But Florim Elshani, 22, says that while hardship was accepted as a matter of course in the years of conflict, rising expectations in post-war Kosovo have made life less bearable in the village these days.

Jobs have not returned with peace. "The ferro-nickel factory which used to be the main source of work for most people in the area before 1989 never restarted after the war, despite our expectations," he said.

"The best you can hope for now is a poorly paid job in the KPC [Kosovo Protection Force] as a police officer or fireman," added Elshani, a former KLA and KPC member.

Fighting is so entrenched in the popular imagination here that from March to May people commemorate the 1999 NATO bombing by flocking to graves to replace last year's plastic wreaths and to pay tribute to the dead fighters with songs, speeches and poems. Few of these dead men have decent monuments. Xhemë Binaku, 50, a local teacher and journalist, says the lack of tombs visible from the roadside is a sign of how poor most people remain "despite the fact that this was the area that produced the most fighters and that sacrificed the most".

"If people here could afford it, we would build more tombs to our martyrs," added Binaku, pointing at an unfinished commemorative statute that was abandoned due to lack of funds.

The past plays such an important role in the lives of villagers in Drenica that when three masked men showed up on the fifth anniversary of the death of two former KLA soldiers on April 12, some people thought they were back in the 1990s under Serbian rule.

The masked figures emerged from behind the hill in Bajice/Rezistence, approached the crowd and read a speech on behalf of the Albanian National Army, ANA, in which they called for a "fight for the freedom of Albanian lands that are not controlled by KFOR and for Albanian interests wherever they are".

They left towards the same direction from which they had mysteriously come, explains Binaku, who was present at the annual commemorative event.

"I felt paralysed and had goose-bumps on my skin," he said. "My mind immediately went back to 1997 when the KLA appeared in just the same way."

Binaku was referring to the KLA's symbolically-loaded first public appearance on November 27, 1997, when the would-be guerillas unveiled their strategy at the funeral of Halil Geci, a teacher killed the previous day by Serb troops in a skirmish with the KLA.

After this appearance, the KLA which then comprised no more than a handful of guerrilla cells, grew fast. Its widely-supported uprising against Serbian rule expanded into other parts of Kosovo and culminated in the 78-day NATO bombing campaign of Serb forces.

The ANA, on the other hand, is a recent invention. The first subversive action in Kosovo for which it assumed responsibility was in April 2003, when it said it was behind the bombing of the Zvecani bridge in the north of Kosovo.

Michael Steiner, then head of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK, promptly named the ANA a terrorist organisation.

Since then, the organisation - which is more active in Macedonia and southern Serbia - has maintained a profile largely through the internet, by posting e-mail communiqués, as well as by daubing occasional bits of graffiti on town walls.

It claims to have infiltrated the KPC and Kosovo intelligence sources say it was one of the radical groups that took part in the March riots, when violence erupted against local Serbs and UN staff.

But it's unclear how much of threat the ANA really poses or how cohesive and permanent a force it is. There are estimates that this secretive group can count on no more than 200 men in the region as a whole. And there have been persistent reports that some ANA members are heavily involved in smuggling, prompting allegations that its political stance is no more than a convenient cover for crime.

The appearance of the three masked men in Drenica on April 12 on behalf of the ANA may be a sign that the phantom organisation is testing the ground for support in the aftermath of the March riots.

However, few have taken the gesture that seriously. In Pristina, most people looked on the sight of men in masks reading a speech at a commemorative event with amusement.

"Each spring, when bushes grow, a new army appears in Kosovo," read the humorous headline in Zeri, the main weekly newspaper.

KFOR was less amused. Its spokesman, James Moran, told IWPR that it took the public appearance of the ANA seriously and that alliance forces, together with UNMIK police, were investigating the case.

"KFOR has increased security measures in the area and is patrolling continuously," Moran said.

Gani Thaqi, 40, a villager from Bajica/Rezistence, believes the masked men selected his village for their parade in the hope of tapping popular feelings of desperation in the Drenica area.

"Considering how many young people here were prone to fighting and how many losses we had in the war, the masked men probably hoped support for ANA would flow automatically," he said.

The masked men certainly succeeded in eliciting a round of applause from those present, though Xheme Binaku says this reflected popular nostalgia for the old KLA freedom fighters rather than support for the aims of the ANA.

But Elshani, who as a former KLA and KPC member, might appear like an ideal recruit for a new guerrilla army, says he was not tempted.

"I don't see what this army could be doing," he said. "We are not under Serbian rule any more and there are totally different security circumstances now compared to those we lived in before the NATO bombing."

"Maybe they know something I don't," he added.

Arben Salihu and Muhamet Hajrullahu are trainees attending IWPR's Journalism Course supported by the OSCE and Jeta Xharra is the IWPR Project Manager in Pristina.

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