

Protectorate Kosovo: What NATO's war and occupation have wrought

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A “civil” and “democratic” society was to be established in Kosovo—such was the official rationale for the transformation of the province into a protectorate of the Great Powers. Three months after the intervention of NATO troops, the divisions in this society are emerging ever more clearly, and it would be hard to imagine a more repellant scenario.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has already reported on the expulsion of the non-Albanian population. From the initial 180,000-200,000 Serbian inhabitants, only 30,000 remain. From the 30,000-40,000 Roma gypsies, 7,000 are left—and the flight is continuing. Every day between three and five persons are killed. In the first two months of the NATO occupation 250 died. That is far more than the number of casualties in the weeks before the NATO war began.

As a rule the media has dealt with the wave of expulsions and violence in the region under the general formula “ethnic cleansing”, as if the problems could indiscriminately be explained away as ethnically motivated acts of revenge. However, when one carefully examines the reports from the various regions of Kosovo a very different picture emerges.

Ethnic motives are in many cases just an excuse for a ruthless re-division of property. And it is not just Serbs who are being oppressed by Albanians and Albanians by Serbs—these terms themselves are misleading because they obscure social differences, including those dividing the Albanians themselves.

The situation was vividly portrayed in a document published on August 17 by the American *Institute of War & Peace Reporting* from Pristina: “Disputes between Albanians and Serbs, as well as within the Albanian community, over apartments, shops, and other property frequently end in violence. Returning refugees who have been rendered homeless claim homes once owned by Serbs, and evict the occupants by force. Albanians who were once evicted from apartments by Serb courts are now returning to reclaim their former homes from the Serb beneficiaries of the court rulings, only to find that another Albanian family got there first.”

The struggle for the flats and houses is no longer an issue of securing a roof over one's head. It has become a lucrative business.

On August 15 the British *Observer* newspaper reported: “The Albanian mafia, posing as freedom fighters, have turned the ‘ethnic cleansing’ of Kosovo into a lucrative business.” Youth who believed they were working for figures in the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), and were engaged in revenge attacks on Serbs, “were being manipulated by the mafia in a housing scam, with vacant properties being sold to homeless ethnic Albanians for 400 deutsche marks each.”

Even more profitable is the renting of flats and houses to NATO military personnel, members of the NATO-UN administration and relief agency workers. The roughly 50,000 persons stationed in Kosovo bring with them a continuous stream of international currency and have become a central part of the native economy.

While a professor at the University of Pristina earns 200 deutsche marks a month, a translator or driver for an international organisation can earn six times as much. The quickest way to wealth is via real estate. The various international agencies fork out between 1,000 and 12,000 deutsche marks in rent every month for the scarce flats and houses that are available.

While the struggle over apartments and houses takes place within the grey area of unclarified property ownership and criminal activities, the battle over state property, still formally owned by the Serbian government in Belgrade, proceeds at the highest level.

“The provisional government of [KLA leader] Thaci,” according to the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (August 23), “is apparently striving to win control of the entire state property, which now, according to its version of events, no longer belongs to the Serbs, but rather to the Republic of Kosovo. They follow the old communist method of exerting power: bureaucratic centralisation of state power, distribution of sinecures to trusty followers.”

The *International Crisis Group*, an international institution

supported by a number of governments, sees the current power struggles in Kosovo in this connection. An ICG report from June 28 reads: "While ethnic Albanian leaders may be united by the common goal of independence for Kosovo, they are bitterly divided by personal and ideological differences, petty rivalries and a lust for power.... Ultimately, however, the conflict between the various ethnic Kosovo Albanian groups is more about personal rather than ideological rivalries."

In this battle of all against all it is inevitably the most ruthless, corrupt and criminal elements who make their way to the top of the pile. A report from Pristina by the *Frankfurter Rundschau* of August 28 provides a glimpse of the social climate predominating in Kosovo's capital city.

Stephan Israel reports on the "glittering new cars" which during the day block the streets of hot and sunny Pristina. In the cars are "often young men, with dark sunglasses who do not say much". Every sort of drug can be obtained at dumping prices, "an indication that organised criminality has an easy time of it at the moment in Kosovo". More than three months after the arrival of the NATO troops, Kosovo remains a lawless place.

Formerly, Kosovar businessmen bribed the Serbian authorities. Since their departure "various groups are involved in a new re-division of the market. Small businessmen must pay protection money—a process about which no one speaks. Some 'tax collectors maintain that they are representatives of the provisional government of KLA commander Hashim Thaci. Others 'work on behalf' of rival groups." The report closes with the comment: "There is the danger of Kosovo becoming a Balkan Sicily, or even worse, a mini-Russia."

All of this is taking place under the noses of the NATO troops and the UN administration. Naturally, these organisations maintain that their function is to rein in crime and build up a functioning administrative, legal and police structure. But this is no more believable than their former contention that the bombing of Yugoslavia would put an end to ethnic conflicts in Kosovo.

In the final analysis, the growth of corruption and criminality arises from the logic of capitalist penetration of Eastern Europe, which proceeds in the name of personal enrichment, unscrupulous egoism and the rejection of any form of social responsibility. In order to head off any resistance on the part of the local community, the Western powers have established alliances with the most right-wing and corrupt elements. This is clear when one casts a glance at Russia, where Boris Yeltsin has earned the reputation of a swindler, or Bosnia, where, according to recent reports, a billion dollars in aid money has disappeared, much of it, apparently, into the bank accounts of UN-backed presidents

and their families.

The impact of the war has speeded up this process in Kosovo. A veritable infection of criminality and corruption has broken out that threatens to engulf not just the Balkans, but Europe as a whole.

The most important partner of NATO in Kosovo, the KLA, has close ties with the Albanian mafia. The KLA's connections to organised crime were an open secret long before the Kosovo war. Albanian mafia clans, operating not just from Kosovo, but also out of Albania and Montenegro, are regarded in European police circles as the most dangerous breed of organised crime.

According to a report by the German Justice Department they are characterised by "extreme readiness to use violence" and "the most massive and brutal exertion of violence". Archaic tribal structures, maintained amidst the backwardness and poverty of Albania and Kosovo, ensure a close collaboration of the clans, which are capable of establishing an extremely effective network throughout Europe.

According to the magazine *Spiegel*, which devoted an extensive article to this theme on August 2, before the war in Kosovo began a part of the money raised through trade in drugs and people, prostitution and gang burglaries went directly to the KLA. "Under interrogation, suspected burglars admitted that they had to turn over between 10 and 15 percent of the booty as donations."

This has not stopped NATO from assisting the KLA in taking over the state. In Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia the mafia has been able to function virtually without hindrance. On the south Italian Adriatic coast, which can be rapidly reached by speedboat, a veritable war takes place every night. Smugglers and black marketeers in armoured cars are involved in chases with the Italian police which often involve the exchange of gunfire.

Were NATO to "liberate" Sicily from Italy and hand over power to the local Mafia, the result could hardly be more disastrous than the current situation in Kosovo.



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