

Berlin panel discussion on Kosovo: Marxism vs. nationalism

Our correspondent
29 November 2006

A panel discussion on Kosovo last Wednesday in Berlin illustrated the profound gulf between a Marxist attitude to the national question and a petty-bourgeois radical approach.

The discussion took place within the framework of the 8th Balkan Black Box festival, which featured film, music, exhibitions, literature and debate from the southeast region of Europe. The meeting was titled “Self-Determination for All? The Kosovo Question and the German Left.” Although those taking part in the discussion identified themselves politically as “left-wing,” the debate made clear the huge gulf between the various standpoints represented. These ranged from open advocacy of Kosovo-Albanian nationalism, to the glorification of Serbian nationalism, to the standpoint of socialist internationalism.

Max Brym from Munich put forward the first of these viewpoints. Brym is the publisher of the web site *Kosova-Aktuell* (Kosovo-Current) and is a member of the organisations Election Alternative, Labour and Social Justice (WASG), and the Socialist Alternative (SAV).

Kosova-Aktuell provides a platform for various currents of Kosovar nationalism to propagate their chauvinist poison. Representatives of the nationalist UCK feature on the web site as well as the group “Movement for Self-Determination” (LPV). The latter adamantly rejects any negotiations with Belgrade over the status of Kosovo and unconditionally advocates “sovereignty for Kosovo”—a position that could only be achieved through a new ethnic bloodbath. On *Kosova-Aktuell*, the terms “Serbia” and “Serb” are usually accompanied by the adjective “fascist.”

Brym, who writes most of the editorial articles for *Kosova-Aktuell*, attempted to drape this nationalist drivel in the mantle of “left” politics by elevating the “right to national self-determination” to a general Marxist principle completely separated from any concrete historical context or analysis. Brym declared that the right to self-determination applied exclusively to Kosovo-Albanians, and depicted Serbs—including all Serbian workers—as reactionaries. Other oppressed minorities, such as the much-persecuted Roma, are simply not included in his vision of the world.

Some years ago, Brym wrote: “Independence for Kosovo is necessary in order to re-establish a workers’ movement in Serbia, which does not allow its own reaction to be based on medieval myths of territorial claims. Democratic and social struggle is impossible as long as Serbian workers think of Kosovo exactly the same as do Serbian reactionaries. The Albanian people strive for

independence (along with other national groups in the region); this striving can only be suppressed with terrorist force, and so long as Serbian workers support [such force]...there will be no connection with the Albanian masses.”

According to the macabre logic of this argument, Serbian workers are to be cured of reactionary nationalism by establishing an independent Kosovo through the UCK—a right-wing bourgeois movement that has been proven to have multifaceted connections to organised crime! In 1999, the same UCK cooperated with the US secretary of state at the time, Madeleine Albright, in unleashing the provocations that were used as the pretext for the NATO bombardment of Serbia and many Serbian factories.

Brym defended this standpoint at the discussion in Berlin and was supported by his organisation—the SAV. With regard to the alleged “Marxist principle advocating the right to national self-determination,” SAV national spokesman Stefan Stanicic recently declared, “A sovereign Kosovo...offers a perspective which can be of use to all progressive forces in the Balkans.”

Peter Schwarz, who took part in this panel discussion on behalf of the *World Socialist Web Site*, vigorously opposed this attempt to drape nationalism and chauvinism with pseudo-Marxist phraseology.

In his initial contribution to the meeting, Schwarz declared his adherence to an internationalist standpoint and his rejection of any form of nationalism—albeit Albanian or Serbian. An independent Kosovo, he said, “would not represent any realisation of the democratic and social strivings of the Kosovo population. Such a state would be a puppet in the hands of the great powers. It would be incapable of any independent economic existence and would be characterised by backwardness and suppression—to put it bluntly, it would be a nightmare.”

Only the unification of workers of all nationalities on the basis of the struggle for a socialist federation of the Balkans can overcome political and social oppression and liberate the region from the stranglehold of the great powers, he continued. The division of the region into new ethnically defined mini-states serves only to intensify oppression and subordination to great power politics.

Schwarz stressed that one could not abstractly derive a standpoint on the Kosovo question on the basis of the “right to national self-determination.” It was necessary to arrive at a historical understanding of the national question in the Balkans, which adequately takes into account all international aspects.

Schwarz pointed out that it was the great powers, in particular

the German government led by conservative Chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU—Christian Democratic Union) and Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who accelerated the break-up of Yugoslavia by calling for the recognition of an independent Slovenia and Croatia, and later Bosnia. Their aim was to strengthen their own influence in the region through this policy of “Balkanisation.” As a potential regional power, Serbia stood in the way of German interests, and their cynical manipulation of the Kosovo question then became the basis for the bombardment of Belgrade by NATO.

One could also not ignore the fact that the Yugoslav war was “used by the US as a kind of dress rehearsal for the Iraq war, while in Germany—thanks in particular to the Green Party—the conflict provided the first opportunity for an international deployment of the German army.”

In the course of the discussion, Schwarz argued against the standpoint that the right to national self-determination represented some sort of timeless Marxist principle.

“The defence of oppressed nationalities does not oblige Marxists to support bourgeois nationalism,” he said. “The progressive character of the national liberation struggle was historically bound up with the tasks posed by the bourgeois-democratic revolution—the democratic transformation of the state, the solution of the land problem, the overcoming of feudal divisions, the creation of a national market, and shaking off of the yoke of imperialism. When, on the other hand, a national movement predominantly defends the privileges of a certain nationality or class—and this is the character of all bourgeois movements—then it inevitably assumes a reactionary form.”

Lenin adopted the slogan of self-determination in the programme of the Bolsheviks. “However, this was by no means seen as proffering support for national separatism. It was a means of emphasising Bolshevik opposition to the actions of the Russian government, which sought to force oppressed nationalities to remain in the Tsarist empire through military force. The demand was aimed at overcoming the mutual animosities of workers from different nations and the influence of petty-bourgeois nationalists.”

It was only later that Stalinists and others opponents of Marxism undertook to twist the demand into uncritical support for every type of nationalist demand.

“In the Balkans, where there is a diffuse mesh of different borders and peoples, Marxists put forward the perspective of the United States of the Balkans in opposition to the efforts of various nationalist forces to bloodily re-divide the region into ethnically defined mini-states,” Schwarz stated.

He quoted from a 1910 article by Leon Trotsky, in which he explains that there are only two possibilities for overcoming the patchwork of dwarf states in the region in favour of a durable and stable state: “Either from above, by expanding one Balkan state, whichever proves stronger at the expense of the weaker ones—this is the road of wars of extermination and oppression of weak nations, a road that consolidates monarchism and militarism; or from below, through the peoples themselves coming together—this is the road of revolution, and the overthrow of the Balkan dynasties.”

Schwarz went on to warn of the consequences of policies based

on the creation of new small states, such as those defended by Brym and the SAV. “If every nationality seeks to establish its own ethnically pure state, it leads to a chain reaction comprising bloody waves of expulsions. Marxists must never adapt to nationalist currents, even if they appear to have some broad support. Instead, Marxists must oppose such forces and warn of their consequences.”

Another participant in the podium discussion, Rüdiger Göbel from the newspaper *Junge Welt*, also criticised Kosovar separatism. Unlike Schwarz, however, he did not put forward an independent perspective for the working class. Instead he called for recognition of the inviolability of existing borders, and appealed to international law and the United Nations.

The discussion was followed with keen interest by an audience of about 50. Questions included one on why nationalist movements in post-Stalinist eastern European countries have been able to mobilise support.

While others on the panel sought to evade the question, Schwarz pointed to two factors in such a development. The first factor was the decades-long and systematic suppression of socialist traditions, together with the extermination of a whole generation of Marxist revolutionaries by Stalinism in the 1930s. This served to undermine the class consciousness of the working class and create a political vacuum, which could be exploited by right-wing forces.

The second factor rests with the response of the new wealthy elites formed out of the former bureaucracy and mafia-type elements, who repeatedly seek to play the nationalist card when they see their interests threatened by any broad social movement. Typical in this respect is the way in which Russian President Vladimir Putin has exploited the issue of the Russian war against Chechnya.

In closing his remarks, Schwarz warned against any adaptation to such currents: “As a Marxist, one cannot make any compromises over the issue of nationalism, otherwise one must answer for its consequences. It is necessary to systematically and decisively oppose it.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact