



On the Record: Civil Society in Kosovo - the Crisis Years

Issue 6: Picking Up the Pieces, September 18, 1999

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From the AP Editorial Desk by Iain Guest

In this issue of the series, Peter looks at the struggle that faces Kosovo's activists as they try to adjust to a dramatic new political context, while healing their own wounds.

From Peter's diary:

We came over a hill and suddenly there was Prishtina in the valley ahead. My impression from the traffic on the street and the people walking around was that life looks normal. From Bosnia I know that under this veneer of normality lies deep trauma.

Their buildings are dirty, but their apartments are spotless. Shoes are left outside the door. Warmth and hospitality prevail inside. Coffee, strong Turkish tea, and fruit are an obligatory part of visiting. Optimism is the rule. It's not unusual that the first thing I hear from someone is: "A miracle has happened." While there has been trauma and there is anger, people are looking forward. Almost everyone I have talked with in the last few days dismisses problems of factionalism and looting. People see the latest developments as a step towards independence.

In fact the atmosphere on the streets is 180 degrees different from when I was here in the spring of 1998. Then, young people did not walk the streets after dark. Now they throng at certain collection points – the "Brooklyn Bar," for example. Around nine in the evening you can hardly pass through that area. People sitting at outdoor tables jump up suddenly to hug friends they haven't seen since before the NATO intervention. (July 1999)

"A Curious Combination of Hope and Hell" by Peter Lippman

The entire world was surprised when most of the exiled Albanians streamed back into Kosovo upon the withdrawal of Serbian forces in mid-June. Neither Albanians nor anyone else expected this outcome. Yet it is logical. No one wants to be a refugee – and when the opportunity to return home presented itself, people lost no time in going back to Kosovo to reclaim their land. In some cases, people were back in their villages ahead of KFOR (NATO's Kosovo Force) soldiers.

When the returning refugees arrived in Kosovo, they found themselves in a place that was a curious combination of hope and hell. On one hand, Albanians were experiencing some kind of freedom for the first time in their lives. Euphoria reigned and it was difficult not to be optimistic. At the same time, somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 homes were destroyed, and the rough estimate of those killed by Serbian forces is around 10,000.

The uniformed Serbian forces are gone, leaving destruction and a vacuum where the power of the state used to be. KFOR and the United Nations are struggling to replace that authority with a temporary protectorate. The KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) has become the dominant – but not the sole – indigenous political force jockeying for power. The combination of vengeance and petty criminality has already made the atmosphere uneasy for Albanians and impossible for Serbs and Roma, who have started leaving the province en masse. And while the mood was predominantly happy, sometimes joyful, in Prishtina (Pristina) and Prizren, it was somber in Gjakova (Djakovica) and Peja (Pec), where the number of killed and missing was higher and the amount of physical damage was extreme.

It is an unusual situation – a whole society returning, catching its breath, and preparing to re-create itself. In the midst of it all, Kosovar civic organizations were pulling themselves together and getting ready to play an indispensable part in the reconstruction of Kosovo. Activists in the sphere of human rights, relief, and women's issues must deal with trauma. They must deal with the fact that there is no progress without international aid, and yet the international organizations show varying degrees of respect, and sometimes disrespect, for the local organizations.

The activists are the people. They are, after all, former refugees themselves – themselves traumatized, sometimes homeless, sometimes wondering where their own relatives are. They share in a disorientation that we can barely imagine, that stems both from having lived through the upheaval and from looking at the chaos that has to be cleared away.

And yet these are remarkable, resourceful people who in most cases kept their heads throughout in an exemplary way, as you have read in previous issues. These are people who are ready to address the special problems of women, the missing, and the traumatized. If the international community proves capable of playing an effective role in bringing order to Kosovo, then the domestic activists will surely succeed in creating a better Kosovar society.

In large part the story of reconstruction is simply one of activists rolling up their sleeves and getting to work in their field of expertise. For the human rights activists, this involves documentation. For the relief workers, it involves repair of homes and supply of all kinds of assistance. For the women's activists, it involves dealing with traumatization stemming from rape and loss of family members.

Motrat Qiriazhi plans to work again in the regions of Has, and the nearby villages of Krusha e Madhe and Krusha e Vogel. As Igo Rogova told me, the organization will work with women whose husbands were killed, and will involve the local communities in the reconstruction of their own homes. "There are construction companies in Kosovo already," Igo says. "If the world will send money, we will do the work. There is a lot of work to do now."

Marta Palokaj, a leading activist in The Mother Teresa Society, described the situation after the expulsion as catastrophic, "90% of our clinics have been wrecked, and much equipment was stolen. There are many unemployed doctors. It is too early to tell how many people were killed.

"The situation will be different now from what it was before the NATO intervention. The doctors have gone back to work in the state-run clinics and hospitals for the first time in nine years. Many doctors will continue to work with Mother Teresa. But we are receiving more moral support than material assistance. Now we are helping to supply people with equipment and medicine. We intend to open clinics where there are no public ones operating, in villages, places where there are bad roads, but also in towns.

"The whole world did not expect such a fast return of refugees. Of those who are still outside of Kosovo, almost all of them have said they will come back. This includes those who left earlier. They will return more slowly. But almost one million of the last wave of refugees have returned in three weeks. We need to establish the necessary conditions for work and life. Between 40,000 and 50,000 houses have been made unlivable. Many people are living in tents or under plastic sheets."

The legal professionals of "Norma" – Society of Women Legal Professionals are ready to go back to work, both in their careers that were interrupted almost 10 years ago, and in their volunteer activities. Vjosa Nimani Zylfiu says, "I am ready to return to the court. I think that all the people who lost their jobs 10 years ago will go back."

Regarding continued activism, Zylfiu told me, "We want to continue our programs. The Red Cross offered to help us find missing people and reconnect families. We would like to act as a service to other women's organizations, to help acquaint people with their legal rights. We will help to organize workshops and classes in this field. OXFAM is interested in helping us create a program for women in small businesses. We hope to help women open shops."

Nazlie Bala told me that "Elena" needs to open an office, to find financial support, and to "let the situation calm down." She explains, "It is very hard to make contact with people, since many of the telephone lines are not working. But we would like to open an S.O.S. hotline.

"We also hope to go back into the field and collect statements, especially with regard to women who have been raped. We want to encourage women to participate in community life. We hope to have an office with a meeting room. We already have one office, in Gjilan (Gjilane). There is a big need for a women's organization there. The refugees are back in Kosovo now, but they need work."

Melihate Juniku of the Center for the Protection of Women and Children spoke of the priorities of her organization: "The women who lost a son or a husband have the greatest needs. We need to help them get active. They need to be working and earning money. If we can give them some kind of sustainable skills, such as sewing, they will be able to do something for themselves and not have to continually rely on help. What we can do with these women depends on their age and interests. We need to match their needs with our possibilities.

"We had planned to open more branches of our Center, in Pec, Mitrovica, Gjakova, and Suha Reka. Our first step will be to hold seminars for activists in these locations, to get ready for further work. Then we will open the centers. Before the NATO bombing we were in the phase of preparing these seminars."

The League of Albanian Women has presented proposals to international organizations for support for projects, including one to help orphans and widows. "We want to run a kitchen for children in need," Zahidi Zeqire told me. "There are many such children, many displaced people, and we need a new space to take care of them."

"We have 10 staff members, all volunteers. It is difficult to work without money, because all of these people have families. We have four teachers who work with children. There are three psychologists who work with traumatized people."

"We have one family staying here, which has been traumatized. They are from Kosovo Polje, and were beaten by the police. They had been in Albania for a time. The handicrafts on the walls (paintings, textiles) were done with materials donated by OXFAM. Sweaters too. We made an exhibition with paintings done by the children."

The Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms was lucky to find their office intact upon return, with their archives where they had left them. They are resuming compilation of a list of the killed, missing, and arrested. They will also collect evidence of material destruction.

One problem they face is the difficulty in verifying claims of war crimes that took place in Kosovo. Evidence disappears, for instance, when people come home and clean up their houses.

"There is a great change from one year ago, with the oppression removed," Binak Ulaj told me. "Before, we gathered information, but we were not able to defend our rights. Now, we will be able to do educational work to teach people how to respect human rights, from the lowest level of primary school, up to the university. We have published books for primary school on human rights. We are pressing to make human rights a subject in the school curriculum and to create training courses."

"Our old informational network is functioning again. We had 29 sub-councils throughout Kosovo, involving 2,000 associates. In the future we won't require so many informants. But we will continue to have centers here and in Mitrovica, Peja, Gjilan, and Ferizaj [Urosevac]."

Referring to the chaos stemming from the war and the withdrawal of the Serbian authorities, Ulaj said, "The present situation of rights abuses will not last a long time. Social institutions will be established to create order. We will continue to monitor human rights abuses. We have many plans, but we lack the resources."

"The rise of a Mafia after a war is a normal phenomenon. I am an optimist. The worst days are behind us. There are still some problems. There has been an agreement for withdrawal of the Serbs, but there are still problems in Mitrovica and around Gjilan."

"The main problems are in the French sector, which includes Mitrovica and Trepca. Mitrovica is divided by a river. The Serbs are controlling the northern side, the city core. They are not allowing Albanians to return to their homes in that larger part of the city. Wesley Clark (commander of NATO) was in Mitrovica recently and said that this problem would be solved soon. In Gjilan, in the US-controlled sector, there are still snipers shooting at Albanians. Serbs are carrying weapons there.

"There is also pressure to allow the Serbian police to return to the borders soon. We need more time to reduce tension, and establish institutions."

Women, Trauma, and Rights

Women face special problems in the reconstruction of Kosovar society. They were a special target of Serbians during the NATO intervention and the preceding year of conflict. They have to recover from the abuse that they suffered during this time, but they also have to deal with the problems that already existed for women within their society. Some of these problems related to the resistance that exists towards women's development in a rural, patriarchal system.

To hear about these problems is to get as many versions of the truth as there are interviewees. For example, it is clear that the idea of feminism is an unfamiliar one to many activists in Kosovo, let alone the general population. So among those fighting for women's equality, some denied being feminists, while others insisted on it.

Another issue that needs more attention is that of the cultural difference between the city and the village. Throughout southeastern Europe the difference is much greater than is often imagined. This leads to great misunderstanding, often contempt, between rural and urban residents, and the influx of displaced villagers to the cities accentuated these antagonistic feelings. It can be difficult to find urban women who are able to speak accurately about the situation of village women.

Probably the most pressing issue for women in this early post-war period is that of trauma. A large number of Albanian women were singled out for rape or other forms of abuse, especially during the NATO intervention.

As Miki Salihu told me, "There was a large number of rapes. This puts women outside of the society. They are not getting professional help for this. Most of them don't want to talk about it. For an Albanian woman, it is shameful to have been raped, a dark stain on their lives. For now, these women are just closing themselves off. We will see the results of this trauma 20, 30, or 50 years from now. I am afraid about what will happen."

I spoke with women activists to hear their assessment of what it will take to achieve equal rights for women in Kosovo. Lack of education and employment emerged as serious problems. The size of families is seen as particularly important for rural women. But as usual, my respondents had varying opinions.

Vjosa Nimani Zylfiu of Norma spoke to me about the work of her organization and her views on feminism:

"Our organization is not a feminist one. We want to help women, but not work against men. We do not want to make a revolution. We still respect the family and our elders; it's a moral way to be. People think feminism is against men, but I don't think so. But women have to educate the men."

Q. Is there a big difference in the situation for women in the villages and in the city?

A. "Yes, but why? Kosovo is not such a big place. But in the villages, no one opposes the father-in-law. There may be 20 people in one house, but no one would think of it. It is a certain kind of patriarchal order. However, now things are changing. There are televisions in the villages and most people are wearing modern clothing. Almost every family has at least one member working abroad.

"There has not been a women's rights movement here, but it is certainly needed. We wanted to improve women's rights. But that turned out to be a luxury in a state of war. Before the NATO intervention we held several workshops with displaced women from Drenica, women whose houses had been burned. Looking back, I think it wasn't the best time for that.

"There are women who are in unofficial marriages, because they boycotted the official Serbian marriage system. If their husbands have been killed, then they have problems with inheritance. We have helped some of them. We also helped register their children when the archives were burned.

"I don't think that the status of women's rights will improve right away. But it will not go backward, either. We are tenacious. We had equal rights during the war, when it came to being beaten and killed."

Nazlie Bala of the women's rights organization Elena spoke about the emancipation of Kosovar women:

"For there to be freedom, women need economic independence. There are now almost no jobs for women. We have to change this. It is time now to work to bring the situation of women up to international standards. We must start a campaign for women's rights. And when we start to write the Constitution and laws of Kosovo, women will have to be included. There will be resistance from men, but we have to start. Right now, there are only two women in the provisional government.

"In some places in Kosovo, there is still a patriarchal system. But slowly we will bury it. We will work for a better future. We will change, start to break down the walls. Albanians have had a chance to travel; they have seen the world. But they have not had a chance to change. The Serbs did not like to see us change.

"We are a little ahead of Bosnia. It was different in Bosnia, because there women's organizations began to be formed during the war. Here, they started 10 years before the war, and so we were

already prepared."

Marta Palokaj of the Mother Teresa Society told me about women's traumatization and her ideas for improving women's status in the post-war period.

"Women were the most targeted during the bombing. The results of this are disease and psychosocial problems. Women were raped and killed, including girls from age 10 to 20. Many women do not want to speak about this, but it has been a major trauma. For example, women were sometimes ordered to serve the police naked. They will remember that the rest of their lives. Sometimes men had to witness the women being abused, families too. People say in this case that a bullet would have been a gift of God, to avoid such traumas. There are cases where women were prepared to jump out of a window to avoid being abused by the police."

Q. How do you help women who are traumatized?

A. "We often let the mother talk on behalf of the daughter. Sometimes we do not take any data. It can be more help not to talk, to let women have time to recover. To talk about a massacre is easier, because it does not involve something that was shameful for the women.

"People will not speak with psychiatrists, because they think this would mean that they are crazy. The easiest solution is to create a special discussion group, with no names being given and no notes taken. There, people share their concerns and give advice. They don't want to visit a doctor or have their case recorded.

"These problems have a direct connection with people's health. Women become depressed and can't look after their families. In this kind of situation, the children suffer the most. This is happening more in the villages. It is not only a situation from the period of the NATO bombing; it was happening all last year."

Q. When women are more educated, do they have fewer children?

A. "As far as the burden of having many children is concerned, I think that large families will not continue. When few women work, and fewer women receive an education, then the number of children goes up. When women are able to plan their lives, then the number of children goes down. That is, when people are working. I made a plan to help my children get educated and get apartments of their own. On the other hand, when you don't have anything, maybe more children can help you get by."

Q. Is it necessary for women to have fewer children to have emancipation?

A. "You are making a mistake. It is the men who must be emancipated. Children are not only the product of the women. Just because men have been to school does not mean that their minds have been educated. Their consciousness needs to be raised.

"The most important thing for us Albanians is our freedom, so that we don't feel threatened. Throughout our history we have been threatened with occupation. For example, in Albania now,

there has been a decrease in the birth rate. Also, most Albanians believe in God, so abortion is not very popular. This is regardless of whether one is a Muslim or a Christian.

"If the family is wealthy, then it is acceptable to have more children. But the attitude of promotion of family planning mostly is directed towards the poor. Why? People forget that education is needed."

Q. Women need jobs, don't they?

A. "Men need jobs first. When the men become educated, then they will think more about women's emancipation. We need to think about both. It is hard to find an emancipated man."

Melihate Juniku of the Center for the Protection of Women and Children spoke of her hopes for women's accomplishments in the upcoming period, as well as morale of people around Kosovo.

"In these years, the number of women students will increase. Women will become educated; then they will struggle for their right to work. Women are getting into education in greater numbers. The departments of Philosophy, Economics, Law, Philology [Languages], and Medicine, both here and in Tetovo (Macedonia), both have increasing numbers of women.

"People have survived, but they barely have the strength and heart now to relax and be glad about their freedom. I am amazed at how people are celebrating. I lost some cousins in Gjakova, where there was much killing. The police took away my cousin's husband and brother, three sons, and two grandsons. But in Gjakova, I only see pale faces, in which I can read what happened. In that area, people don't have a shred of strength to say, 'This is good.'

"It is easier for those families that have buried their dead, than for those who don't know the fate of their missing relatives."

Q. Do you expect there to be special problems for women in the upcoming years?

A. "We will have to come to our senses. We need to work; everyone would like to be working. We need to figure out how to help where it is most urgent. It is difficult because traumatized people are withdrawn. They are demoralized, and think that this is the end of the world."

Prisoners

Burying a loved one brings a certainty that can be preferable to the anguish of waiting for news of a loved one's fate. In a replay of the Bosnian tragedy, thousands of corpses are now being exhumed from mass graves throughout Kosovo. The identity of these people may never be known.

A particularly high number of people are missing from the Gjakova area – 1,500 from the city alone. Some of these people are doubtlessly no longer alive, but hundreds were taken away to jails in Serbia, where they now sit deprived of contact with their families.

This is by no means restricted to people from Gjakova. Prisoners (especially political activists such as the student leader Albin Kurti and Flora Brovina, founder of the League of Albanian Women) were removed from all parts of Kosovo before and during the NATO intervention.

The Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms listed this issue as its main human rights concern. "There are over 5,000 prisoners," I was told by Binak Ulaj, "and they are imprisoned under horrible conditions. We have spoken with some of the prisoners who were released recently from Serbian jails, and they told us that some Albanians have been executed."

In mid-July, a demonstration of activists and families of the prisoners marched through the center of Prishtina to call attention to the plight of those jailed in Serbia. They were carrying photographs of Flora Brovina and signs that read, "Act Now Before It Is Too Late" and "Where Is My Brother?"

When I visited the office of the Humanitarian Law Center, there were a half dozen men sitting in the reception room poring over several lists of names. These were the freshly released lists of imprisoned Albanians.

The staff member of the Humanitarian Law Center told me, "We are concerned about the political prisoners who have been taken away to Serbia. This is a very difficult situation, because there is no contact with these people. The lawyers in Serbia are not even allowed to have access to these prisoners. Only the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) is allowed to visit them, and not all the prisoners are on the list.

"Only 1,500 names have been released. If the Red Cross does not know the names of the prisoners, then it cannot visit them and they are therefore in great danger. We fear that some of them have been executed. President Milosevic has taken the prisoners into Serbia to hold as a bargaining chip. In the Rambouillet agreement, all political prisoners were supposed to be released within 21 days. But the prisoners were not mentioned in the Kumanovo agreement that ended the NATO intervention."

Looking to the Future

As the euphoria wears off, level-headed Kosovars see more clearly the problems that lie before them and the job they have to do. They have to create Kosovo; to do so they have to repair not only the physical damage, but also the social destruction caused by decades of repression.

No one disputes the value of democracy, but no one defines it either. Can a democracy evolve out of war? Profiteering is more likely, as are the sort of Mafia-like structures that arose from the lack of a strong state in Albania.

Much depends on the resolve of the international community to run a strong protectorate. But even this will not be enough. Will the domestic political forces be democratically inclined? Local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will have to take responsibility to see that their leaders are honest.

At present, the KLA is by far the most popular indigenous force in Kosovo. The view from afar, supported by Western publications, is that this is an insidious organization responsible for terrorizing Kosovo's minorities, poised to take over the province and wreak harm upon all dissenters.

It is probably closer to the truth, however, to say that the KLA is no more a cohesive organization with one master policy than it was a year ago. There are well-meaning, honest leaders among its forces and there are others not so benign. Again, it will be the responsibility of the foreign protectorate and independent activists to ensure that that a pluralist society develops.

Meanwhile, activists have to look after the well-being of women, who are often the first victims when a society reorganizes. As Vjosa Nimani Zylfiu said, "Where there have been big changes in other countries, the position of women has suffered, and I don't know why it would be different here. I fear that women will become property, that prostitution will start. That's the worst thing.

"Maybe our family tradition will save us. We will dedicate more time to school. It is early to tell how we will be. There is still trauma and many houses are destroyed. The trauma passes slowly. Each of us is her own doctor."

I asked a Humanitarian Law Center staff member about her expectations for the future. "Kosovo should be a protectorate, for now. This is very important. It is better to wait two years before elections are held. It is not important for us to have our own government at this point. I don't believe there will be violence between factions of Albanians. People are tired and want to build a democratic system. We can help with that.

"The widespread talk about family and clan law being the rule in Kosovo is propaganda. It is not like Albania here. We had no Mafia, and I hope we won't in the future. There is a good possibility for the development of private business. In the former Yugoslavia, the strongest private companies were in Kosovo. And now, the KLA itself is working to prevent corruption. I'm not worried about this."

Different people describe the present frame of mind of Kosovars in different ways. Father Nash of the Catholic Church of Prishtina is an affable middle-aged man with great concern not only for his congregation, but also for the larger group of Kosovo Albanians, all of whom he considers his people.

"The first problem in Kosovo today is not material, but spiritual," he said. "There is a gathering of negative energy. This happens because people have lost their lives, their houses, and their property. They survived traumas not only here, but also in Blace [on the Macedonian border], where people waited as long as seven to ten days to cross the border.

"We need work at creating positive energy. We risk having a scenario like that of Albania in 1997. There are many NGOs, but they are not doing enough to help people recover from the trauma that they have lived through. Right now this is a priority, because the future depends on our people. If they remain angry, there will be more problems for the entire region, and for the international community.

"It is difficult to propose a prescription for how to deal with this problem. It depends on the individual case. We need to do projects to get people to work together, such as concerts, gatherings, and meetings."