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Research Report

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SWP Comments, No. 11/2003

Provided in Cooperation with:

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

Suggested Citation: Reljić, Dušan (2003) : Extremists take advantage of the political vacuum in Kosovo, SWP Comments, No. 11/2003, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/255887>

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Extremists Take Advantage of the Political Vacuum in Kosovo

Dušan Reljić

The death of two Serb youths killed by machine-gun fire from unidentified assailants while on a bathing trip not far from the village of Goraždevac near Peć on 13 August 2003 (four further youths were seriously injured in the incident) marks the start of an even more brutal episode in the battle for Kosovo. The European Union and the USA need to respond promptly by stepping up their efforts to achieve a sustainable peace accord for the region. Otherwise, a political vacuum could build up, creating new opportunities for extremist forces.

However, there are few signs of the West preparing to launch a sustained political initiative at high diplomatic level to revive the stalled peace process in Kosovo and to de-fuse the increasingly explosive security situation. Especially after the EU summit held in Thessaloniki at the end of June, the impression prevails that the West's interest in political solutions for the western Balkans is waning. The only salient outcome was an agreement that Belgrade and Priština should enter into a direct dialogue. The impression that western policy in Kosovo has come to a standstill is heightened by the fact that the hand-over from the current head of the UN interim administration (UNMIK), the German diplomat Michael Steiner, to his designated successor, the former Finnish Prime Minister Harri Holkeri, took almost two months. At the same time, the urgent need for a solution for the final status of Kosovo is

being stressed more and more strongly from various sides. Holkeri himself has declared, however, that he sees no way of achieving a result that would be satisfactory to all concerned during his one-year period in office.

A new Albanian offensive?

An organization whose importance is difficult to assess as yet, the "Albanian National Union Front" (FBKSH; Fronti për Bashkim Kombëtar Shqiptar), and more specifically its military arm, the "Albanian National Army" (AKSH; Armata Kombëtare Shqiptare), has since the spring of 2003 been launching more and more brutal terrorist attacks in an attempt to undermine the already shaky stability in Kosovo and to unite all Albanians in a single state by use of force. In pursuing this approach they are able to take advantage of the fact

that the elected political representatives of the Albanians in the region are steadily losing their credibility: after four years as a UN protectorate, they have made no significant progress towards the full independence for Kosovo that is the goal of all Albanian politicians.

In the second half of August, the FBKSH extended its military and political offensive beyond Kosovo's borders. A lengthy period of calm was broken by several armed attacks on the Serb military and on the police in southern Serbia (Preševo valley, Medveda and Bujanovac), a area which radical Albanians refer to as "Eastern Kosovo." The FBKSH called upon the Albanian political parties to join in the battle for a Greater Albanian state. In an interview broadcast via the internet, FBKSH spokesperson Alban Vjosa reproached the Albanian political parties in southern Serbia for having failed with the strategy they had been pursuing. Two years ago, these had acceded under western pressure to an agreement with the government in Belgrade and, in return for an amnesty for most of the insurgents, had publicly renounced armed combat.

Belgrade pins its hopes on the USA

The unease in the Albanian camp was to some extent exacerbated by the perceptible rapprochement between Washington and Belgrade in recent months. According to Belgrade press reports, the proposal made by Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Živković in late July to make 1000 soldiers from Serbia and Montenegro available for UN peace missions in Liberia and elsewhere was welcomed in Washington. Earlier, the entire US economic aid for Serbia for this year had been released after Veselin Šljivančanin, a former major in the Yugoslav People's Army wanted for war crimes in Croatia, was arrested in Belgrade and handed over to The Hague.

On his return from Washington, Živković said that the Albanian politicians' criticism of his proposal to deploy Serb troops for international peace missions was "easy" to

explain: they had rightly understood that this mission ultimately made it possible for Serb security forces to return to Kosovo in keeping with UN Resolution 1244. This was the Prime Minister's way of stating his opinion that Serbia's relations with the USA and with the West as a whole had improved considerably. He was also pleased that, on 18 August 2003, the UN Security Council had held an extraordinary session at short notice, which condemned the murder of the Serb youths in Goraždevac. For the first time in more than a dozen years, the UN was "really" listening to the Serb side, the Prime Minister noted, pointing out that this time the Albanian voices had not been the dominant ones. He did not mention the warnings by some western members of the Security Council. The British ambassador had reminded Belgrade and Priština that Serbian-Albanian dialogue would not be well served by a hefty exchange of mutual accusations. The same envoy had rejected Belgrade's proposal to disband the Kosovo Protection Corps, an organization into which former members of the Albanian guerrilla movement had been merged.

Belgrade was much happier to hear the views expressed by some American analysts that Washington saw Belgrade as a potential ally in the battle against global terrorism. There were numerous reports in the media that Islamic fundamentalists were finding shelter in Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania and western Macedonia, areas with a largely Muslim population. It should not be forgotten that the terrorists involved in the attacks of 11. September 2003 in the USA included some who had earlier fought on the side of the Sarajevo government in Bosnia.

Serbian-Albanian dialogue still a long way off?

In mid-August, the Serbian government submitted to parliament a proposal for a political platform for the direct talks between Belgrade and Priština that the West had long been calling for. This move

was an attempt to allay the criticism that, since the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, Belgrade essentially had no policy on Kosovo, but was at most undermining the work of UNMIK. The document re-asserts Serbia's sovereignty over Kosovo while at the same time offering Kosovo broad autonomy with reference to UN Resolution 1244. However, this formulation is ambiguous enough to cover almost any solution, even a merely formal territorial affiliation of Kosovo to Serbia.

Not only among the remnants of the Milošević camp in Serbia, the announcement of the intention to hold talks with the Albanians has triggered strong opposition to the Belgrade government's "soft" policy on Kosovo, which is seen as part of a rapprochement with the West. For instance, in early August the Serbian Orthodox Church circulated a "Memorandum on Kosovo and Metohija" containing statements such as: "What Jerusalem is to the Jews, Kosovo is to the Serbs." Vojislav Koštunica, the former Yugoslav president and chairman of the Democratic Party of Serbia, currently the strongest political figurehead according to opinion polls, rejects the idea of negotiations with Priština, at least as long as the 230,000 Serbs and other non-Albanians who fled or were expelled from Kosovo following the NATO intervention in 1999 are not allowed to return.

Živković is apparently convinced that he can enter into the negotiations with Priština from a strong position and make some ground on the domestic-policy scene. His government's image is tarnished by a number of corruption scandals involving high-level officials. The talks with Priština are meant to discuss issues such as the power supply, road traffic and similar problems. However, time for getting the talks under way is running out, as there are parliamentary elections scheduled for 2004 in Serbia and Kosovo and 2005 in Albania. The elections may even come earlier in Serbia, if the country gets a new constitution in February next year, as the Prime Minister

has promised. However, whether the government can benefit from its ongoing Kosovo policy campaign is more than doubtful. According to all the opinion polls, people are more concerned about the dismal state of the economy, rampant corruption and the crime rate than about the status of Kosovo.

The position held by the representatives of the Kosovo Albanians, on the other hand, has been firmly established for a long time and initially leaves little leeway for settling conflicts by consensus. Neither the President of Kosovo, Ibrahim Rugova, nor Hashim Thaçi, the former leader of the "Kosovo Liberation Army," has given any indication that they would be prepared to accept any less than the full independence of the province as a sovereign state. Thaçi's recent utterings in favor of a moratorium of some years on discussing the status issue are most likely merely an attempt to present himself as a constructive partner in the light of the imminent possibility of charges being brought against him at the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague.

Reactions in Albania and Macedonia

How strained relations in the region really are has become apparent since the onset of the debate over a new constitution in Serbia. Many Serb and Albanian politicians are using the debate as a welcome opportunity to demonstrate their national allegiance in the lead-up to forthcoming elections. The fact that the drafts for the new constitution again declare Kosovo part of the territory of Serbia is seen by prominent Albanian politicians in Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania as a challenge. Thus, according to reports by the Albanian press agency ATA on 16 August 2003, Servet Pellumbi, speaker of the Albanian parliament, rejects this draft constitution as being "contrary to the long-term policy of co-operation and regional integration and to stability and security in the region." In Macedonia, the chairman of the opposition

Democratic Party of Albanians, Arben Xhaferi, pointed out: "All wars and conflicts in the Balkans start when the Serbs change their constitution." He called for diplomatic initiatives in keeping "with the new realities on the Balkans, not only in Serbia and Kosovo, but also in Macedonia."

tion, Harri Holkeri, urgently needs political support. In the coming months, even armed altercations can not be ruled out, in which UN peacekeepers and the international police and security forces clash with the region's extremists.

Prospects

By and large, Kosovo and the adjoining areas of southern Serbia and Macedonia are in a state of increasingly tense unrest. What is particularly worrying is the fact that radical illegal organizations such as the FBKSH/AKSH have taken the initiative, because this encourages extremists on the other side to do the same. For instance, a young Serb was arrested near Kosovska Mitrovica on 19 August 2003 under suspicion of having ambushed and shot an UNMIK policeman (he was later released without charges). There are daily reports of new acts of violence and clashes between Albanians and Serbs. Neither the government in Belgrade nor the Albanian politicians in Kosovo appear at the moment to be able to keep the extremists in their own ranks under control. While the USA maintained open and direct contacts with the "Kosovo Liberation Army" (UÇK) since the outbreak of the war in Kosovo in 1999 at the latest and were able at least to bring some influence to bear on it, today's radical elements are, to all appearances, *independent* in their operations. The western powers and the UN are now faced with the option of either combating these forces resolutely and without delay – or probably in the end having them sitting opposite as uncompromising counterparts at the bargaining table. To prevent the build-up of a political vacuum, it would be expedient, for example, to boost the importance of the recently re-activated international Balkans contact group (USA, Germany, France, UK, Russia). The group could then re-direct the errant attention of the international community back to Kosovo as a crisis spot. The new head of the UN interim administra-

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