

# Kosovo - the ultimate myth

*by Dubravka Stojanovic*

Ever since Martti Ahtisaari made his plan public, we have been hearing the most unbelievable pronouncements coming from Serbian officials concerning Kosovo's future status. Whether 'imaginative' or 'threatening', they have the following in common: they are formulated in such a way as to prepare public opinion for a Serbian refusal to accept the international community's decision.

## An imaginary Kosovo

As in all previous years, their statements address only an imaginary Kosovo. During the parliamentary session at which the Resolution on Kosovo was adopted, no one (except the deputies of the coalition around the Liberal-Democrats) spoke about the concrete political questions that would be posed if by some miracle Kosovo were to remain in Serbia. No one spoke, for example, about how the Serbian army and police would enter Kosovo, given that only the presence of such instruments of force testifies to real national sovereignty. No one spoke about how Kosovo citizens would vote in Serbian parliamentary elections, or how the Serbian elite would deal with Albanian deputies in parliament and Albanian ministers in Serbian governments. What sort of educational system would there be? How would the Battle of Kosovo and the Balkan Wars be taught? Would it be in the spirit of 'the only truth', 'our truth', as our current educational authorities like to say? During all these years, ever since Kosovo was separated from Serbia, I have heard no explication of such questions, because no one ever mentions Kosovo's population. What is talked about in such conversations is only 'Kosovo' - a Kosovo that does not exist in reality, a Kosovo without the people.

It is my view that Serbia lost Kosovo essentially on that issue. For the Serbian political and intellectual class, Kosovo never implied its inhabitants, but only territory - an imaginary territory torn out of time, torn from reality. A battlefield without people, in the year 1389! This is why the debate on whether Kosovo will be lost in 2007 or whether that happened in 1999 is superfluous in my view. Taking into account all the relevant data, I think it happened in 1912, the moment when, five centuries after the celebrated battle, the territory in question was absorbed into the Serbian state.

What is the whole thing all about? Immediately after the start of the first Balkan War in 1912, the Serbian army promptly entered the territory of Kosovo; when peace was signed the region was joined to Serbia, along with Sandak and Macedonia. The papers of the time were full of patriotic outbursts, declaring that Kosovo had been avenged, that Lazar's promise had been fulfilled, that the medieval Serbian state had been resurrected, that the old pledge had been redeemed... At that moment even the habitually cynical Jovan Skerlić was swept along by the patriotic surge. All was exalted and patriotic until the question arose of what kind of government would be established for Kosovo: i.e. a question similar to that which meets with no reply today either. A very interesting debate opened up in the national assembly, which needs to be recalled if we are to think seriously about the very difficult question: how was it possible that within less than a century Serbia lost part of its territory - a part, moreover, that its highest representatives insist is a holy place?

## Occupied territory

Back in 1913 the issue acquired the name of 'regulation of the new territories'. The governing Radical Party, led by Nikola Pašić, argued that a separate military-police regime should be introduced there. During the parliamentary and public debate, government officials insisted that the inhabitants of those territories were not sufficiently civilised, that they were not sufficiently politically mature, and that the Serbian democratic constitution could not be extended to those lands because their inhabitants would not know what to do with the rights it granted. The deputies worried about what would happen if the inhabitants of the 'new territories' gained equal voting rights, how this would influence the political balance inside Serbia itself, what would happen to the established relationship between the parties, and whether this might not bring down the government. Asked by the parliamentary opposition whether the government intended to consult the inhabitants of the 'new territories' on the form of government to be imposed, Stojan Protić [a prominent Radical] replied: 'We did not consult them about their liberation either, which is why our brethren would surely permit us to govern them for five or six years in the manner we deem best. It is because we know better than they how to do it, because we are older and more mature, that we do not feel bound to ask them how they should be governed.'

This question divided the parties at the time. The otherwise conservative Progressive Party demanded that the constitution promptly be extended to the annexed lands, and advocated the convening of a Grand Assembly at which a revision of the 1903 constitution would be carried out. Its deputies argued that Serbian democracy was being tested, and that Serbs should remain consistent opponents of any division between higher and lower races (the effects of which they themselves had experienced). Opposing the government, the Independent Radical Party wrote at the time in its paper *Odjek* [Echo]: 'The Radicals have proclaimed half of [the new] Serbia to be their pashalik. Through their minister of the interior they have proclaimed half of Serbia not to be Serbia, and on the territory which they consider not to be Serbian they have installed a regime of their own choosing.' The Social Democrats were the most vociferous. They wrote in their *Radničke novine* [Workers' News]: 'One can make all sorts of criticism of the Turkish constitution, but one thing is for certain: on entering these lands Serbia should not have moved back from it but instead marched forward - promptly replacing the limited and false Turkish constitution with a true constitution, turning the patriarchal and primitive municipal self-government into a modern one, and giving the population an opportunity to feel itself to be really in Europe rather than treating it as a conquered people.' Responding to the government's analogy of democracy with swimming, and the argument that the population of the 'new territories' could not yet swim, the Social-Democrats responded: 'Can a child ever learn to swim, unless it first jumps into the water?'

The weighty and interesting debate which took place in 1913 (of a kind that we have not had during the past decade or so) did not bear fruit, in that a decree on the new territories was adopted by virtue of which Kosovo was placed under military-police administration. The constitution was not extended to Serbia's new territories, and their citizens did not gain the same rights as those enjoyed by the inhabitants of Serbia proper. A key role in this outcome was played by the conspirators gathered around Apis and the Black Hand. It was they, in fact, who directed Serbia's foreign policy, and who in many ways proved stronger than the Radical government that they had brought to power after assassinating the last Obrenović [in 1903]. They were given the newly annexed territories as a kind of personal fiefdom, in which their power had no bounds.

## Kosovo 'lost' in 1913

Another problem for the population of the annexed area was that police, military and civilian officials preferred not to be posted there. Being sent there was in the nature of a punishment. The officials posted to the annexed area were ones who had been found guilty back in Serbia of corruption, or of physical brutality towards prisoners. It was an administration based on convicts and retired soldiers, who governed without any supervision. This is why I think that Kosovo was 'lost' before it had been 'gained'. It was 'lost' because of the way in which the Serbians thought about it, because of its place

in the myth-prone national ideology, and because of the inability of the ruling elites to accept and understand reality. While seeking to 'free and unite the Serb people' and to create a large national state, Serbian politicians proved unable to rule the annexed lands in a way that would make the new inhabitants accept the new state as their own. This was true of the expanded Serbia in 1913 as well as of all subsequent Yugoslavias. Their attitude towards 'the other' excluded tolerance and equality.

Their understanding of the state, in other words, never went beyond the pre-modern period. The state remained an abstraction, rather like Kosovo. It seems to me, therefore, that we are witnessing the end of a policy, not that of Milo\_evi\_ but one that was ideologically formed at the start of the history of the modern Serbian state. The denouement in Kosovo is also the dissolution of that national ideology, the end of a certain way of perceiving ourselves and others, space and time. It represents the final defeat of a stubborn refusal to understand the world and historical circumstances, and critically to confront ourselves. It is the end of a national arrogance and a distorted perception of reality.

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