

**KOSOVO 2006:**  
**THE CURRENT SITUATION OF RROMA**

Dr. Stephane Laederich

Rroma Foundation  
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## **I. BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION**

The situation of Rroma in Kosovo is deemed to be secure enough by some of the European or State Institutions. One often hears that, with the exception of the euphemistically called “Events” of March 2004, there has been a decrease of reported attacks against ethnic minorities in the region. In a previous report, in 2005, we have already said that this assessment of the situation is not reflecting the actual situation in the country for ethnic minorities in general and Rroma in particular.

For while it is certainly true that the number of reported attacks against Rroma has steadily decreased in the years since the end of the war in 1999, two obvious reasons for this decrease are rarely mentioned in official reports.

The first one is that the country is basically ethnically cleansed. Many cities, town, and villages are simply devoid of any traces of their pre-war Rroma population. This is for example the case in Prishtina, one of the most obvious examples where the quarter in which Rroma had their houses was razed after the war and is now being re-settled by ethnic Albanians. And if there are no minorities, how can there be any attacks against them?

The second factor contributing to this decrease of the reported number of aggressions against Rroma has to do with the actual judicial system and its current workings. A Rrom who lodging a complaint for whatever reason will in most cases be threatened or worse, and as a result, will withdraw his complaint. In other cases, witnesses are the object of outright pressures, or the defender will produce witnesses that contradict the claimant’s version of the events.

One cannot fail to recognise the fact that there is still to be a condemnation for an attack against Rroma, this even after the events of 2004. While this claim cannot be made for other minorities, for some Albanians were indeed convicted in a handful of cases involving Serbians, there is a de facto lawlessness in this region, a lawlessness that is condoned by the authorities, and against which the UNMIK and KFOR are either unwilling or not interested to act.

## **II. RROMA IN KOSOVO**

### **1. The Rroma Population**

The actual extent of the Kosovo pre-war population is a heated subject of discussion. According to the official census, the last one having been held in the region in 1991, the actual number of Rroma was tiny, under ca. 100’000. That this census was biased is easy to double-check: First of all, we have encountered only few Rroma who declared themselves as such during that census. The overwhelming majority of them declared themselves to be ethnic Albanian. This was due in part to the actual pressure of Albanian nationalists to increase their numbers within the region. To a lesser extent, many Rroma identified themselves with the Kosovo nationalists and this also prompted a few of them to declare themselves Albanians.

The second important fact stems from the continuous archives one possesses about that region. The earliest accurate census in Kosovo was done by the Ottomans in the early XVIth century. This census listed not only Rroma but all taxpayers in the European Ottoman Empire. Subsequent tax registers confirmed the data gathered in the first census. The Rroma population of that region was never below 15% of the total population and did not vary much over the centuries. Interesting to note is that all Rroma were sedentary, and had all sorts of jobs ranging from farmer, steel or weapon smith, teacher, lawyer, policeman, etc. Extrapolating this percentage of population that has remained remarkably stable, one arrives at a number in excess of 300'000 Rroma in the region prior to the war. This extrapolation may seem to be far fetched to some, but for example, in Bulgaria, it is a perfectly valid one, as extrapolating the Ottoman numbers of around 10-12%, one arrives at 800'000 to 1'000'000 of Rroma which is an accurate reflection of the current census numbers.

At the conference of Rambouillet, Rroma presented themselves divided, with Rroma, Ashkali, and Egyptians, each with a claim of ca. 100'000 members. This is yet another indication of the number of Rroma that lived in the region prior to the war. Finally, one should not neglect the numbers of Rroma refugees reported by the UNHCR and various countries in Western Europe, a number far in excess to the "official" numbers of the pre-War population advanced by some Albanians (see the section on the official Albanian position).

## **2. Groups and Locations**

Who has not heard the by now notorious "RAE", standing for Rroma, Ashkali, and Egyptians, being used out of some misguided sense of political correctness by various NGOs and governments.

Fact is, this makes precious little sense. Rroma in Kosovo are actually from three different groups: The Arlii, the vast majority of the Rroma who lived in the region prior to the war. This group is also found in Macedonia and in Bulgaria (there under the endonym of Jerlides). The Kovaci also known as Bugurdzi, constitute the second main group in the region. Finally, the third group, the Gurbeti, are a more recent arrival in the region. These Rroma arrived in the XVIIIth century from Romania from where they were fleeing slavery. They settled in Serbia proper, in Bosnia, and to a lesser extent in Kosovo. This last group was by far less integrated than the previous two, usually exercising various trades, buying and selling various items on the market. Contrary to the Arlii and Kovaci, the Gurbeti were also semi-nomadic originally, although by the end of the XIXth century, all had settled.

So who are the Ashkali and the Egyptians? The origin of the name Egyptians can be traced back to Greek, where Rroma were called Giftoi, meaning Egyptians. However, there are no mentions of such a group in the region until the late 1950's after the visit of Nasser to Tito. Ashkali are even more recent. They practically appeared in the 1990's. Both groups claim not to be Rroma, something which may seem quite confusing to the layman. Both groups are in fact very much related to either Arlii or Kovaci, for elder members of those groups, when asked what they were before, often refer to either Arlii or Kovaci. Fact is, many of these Rroma no longer speak Rromanes. Their origin can be traced to political games during Milosevic's rule, first and

foremost, the need for Serbian to appear to be the “largest” minority in the region, requiring a division of the Rroma population so as not to be overwhelmed by their numbers.

In this paper, we will always refer to Rroma in general, covering all groups and non-Rromanes speaking Rroma such as the Ashkali and Egyptians.

Rroma in the region were (and the few remaining still are) speaking Rromanes, besides Albanian, Serbo-Croatian, and of course Turkish. Not the modern Turkish, but the Ottoman one. It is thus not unusual to hear discussions starting in one language and ending in another. In that sense, Rroma, as elsewhere have at least dual mother tongues. In the peculiar situation of the Kosovo, this results in people speaking 4 languages from childhood onwards, and often another one such as English or German, the latter being quite common due to the number of guest workers having gone to German speaking countries as early as the 1960's.

### **3. Mahala – Gypsy Quarters**

The image of Rroma, when settled, often conjures the image of slums, or at least utmost poverty, as can be seen for example in Slovakia or in Romania. This image, currently strongly conveyed by the Albanian authorities (see the section on the official Albanian position), cannot be further from the original reality.

While Gypsy quarters, called Mahalas in the Balkan, certainly did exist, these were never slums. The origin of these Mahalas (quarters) dates from the Ottoman occupation of the Balkan. The Ottoman chose to segregate the population of cities according to religion, language, and origin. So in cities throughout the Balkan, there were Serbian, Albanian, Armenian, Turkish, Rroma, etc., Mahalas in each city.

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, this segregation was no longer necessary, but many Balkan cities, such as Prizren, have kept part of their original segregation. It would be wrong to say that Rroma lived exclusively in Mahalas, exactly as it would be wrong to say that all Mahalas were exclusively occupied by Rroma. Rather, the term Mahala applied, especially during socialism, to places where Rroma lived, whether they be the majority or a minority. In Kosovo, the term of Mahala has been associated with a street rather than with a quarter. For example, the so-called Terzi Mahala in Prizren took its name from the Tailors who used to work there (many of the Rroma), and is a street.

Prior to the War, while there were Mahala in which nearly all inhabitants were Rroma (Prishitna, Vushtrrin, Mitrovica, etc.), the majority of Rroma lived in ethnically mixed neighbourhoods. This was especially the case in villages, where Rroma houses were typically scattered in the village.

It would be totally wrong (although Albanians tend to convey this picture) to assume that Rroma lived side by side with the Serbs and avoided contacts with the Albanian majority. While it is true that in some places, such as in the North East of the region this used to be the case, at least

to some extent, one has to say that this was not typical. Even in Mitrovica, there were Rroma living in Serbian as well as Albanian neighbourhoods.

So what of the image of poverty, of the ghetto? This did nearly not exist in Kosovo prior to the War. The houses were usually quite large and well kept, a testimony to the integration of the Rroma in this region, in fact, indicating that the Rroma prior to the war were part of the bourgeoisie of the towns.

#### **4. Pre-War Integration**

All Rroma prior to the war were working, in all sorts of jobs. There were school-teachers, lawyers, judges, doctors, engineers, firemen, policemen, bakers, tailors, factory workers, farmers, etc. One could be tempted to conclude rather hastily that this was the result of the socialist regime, where it not for the confirmation stemming from the Ottoman tax registers dating as far back as 1528 that list the very same list of jobs that is usually not associated with Rroma, at least in Western Europe.

This, together with the fact that many Rroma went to Germany or Switzerland to work, as did many people in ex-Yugoslavia, meant that the Rroma were part of the bourgeoisie and middle class of the towns in Kosovo.

As part of this integrated society of Kosovo, and due to the fact that the vast majority of Rroma identified themselves with the Albanian majority, the Rroma suffered as much as the Albanians during the Milosevic years. Many of them, especially when working in the administration, lost their jobs in the 1990's and we met many a Rrom who then actively worked in setting up and maintaining the parallel Kosovo administration (schools, amongst other) until the War started.

To give but one parade example, the current prosecutor general of Prizren is a Rrom. He had various jobs as lawyer, judge or prosecutor in the Yugoslav administration for thirty years until the arrival of Milosevic. Once Milosevic removed all Albanians from the administration, he loost his job and had to survive as best as he could. He recovered his job after the war at the behest of the UNMIK. His case is typical of the stories we have heard in the region from various Rroma, and runs against the openly stated Albanian view that all Rroma were close to the Milosevic regime, collaborated with it and took over the jobs from which the Albanians were expelled.

### **III. CURRENT SITUATION**

#### **1. Overview**

Regardless which estimates one takes, there are currently no more than 10-20% of the original Rroma population in the country. The estimates vary widely (see for example one Albanian view below), but by most accounts, there are no more than ca 20 to 25 thousand Rroma left in the country. Some places are totally ethnically cleansed, some other have suffered less: In some

place, there are simply no Roma left, while in others, up to 40% of the Roma population has managed to avoid eviction or worse.

However, for those who remain, the situation has not improved in any way, rather it has become more acute, and the chances that the remaining Roma in this region will be driven out is actually very high. One of the fears of the Roma is that the KFOR will leave, and that at that moment, the Roma will be driven out or even worse, killed outright. Bear in mind that this does not reflect the fact that the KFOR is actually actively protecting the Roma minority in the country. This is not the case. None of the international institutions present in the region actually seem to care for their fate. So this fear is just that the only moral barrier preventing the Albanian majority from is the presence of the KFOR and the need for the Kosovo government to look “good” with its minorities for as long as the region has not achieved the desired final status, the independence.

## 2. Ethnically Cleansed Towns and Villages

The vast majority of towns and villages in Kosovo have been totally ethnically cleansed. To give but a few selected examples:

- **Prishtina:** The so-called Moravska Mahala, with roughly 10'000 Roma has been totally obliterated. In the meantime, Albanians have started building house on the site of this former Mahala. No Roma are left there. In fact, the situation in Prishtina is so dangerous for Roma, that only a hand full of “light-skinned” Roma dare to live there. Others come for work but do not stay there. Attacks against Roma have been reported, and there seems to be no improvement of the situation.
- **Vushtrrin:** There were two Mahala in this town, with ca. 200 houses in the larger one of the two near the church. One was near the catholic church, the other near the stadion. Both have been obliterated, and no traces remain of the Roma houses that were standing there. In fact, the burned out house that still can be seen near the Mahala are Serbian houses, and not Roma ones. Nowadays, there are a few Ashkali families left in that town. The rest have fled to various places. Note that a lot of the houses were destroyed as recently as 2004.
- **Mitrovica:** There are now ca. 200 Roma families, mostly Gurbeti, all in all ca. 2'000 people, living in refugee camps in the Serbian enclave of the town. The original Mahalas have been totally gutted, and only few traces remain. Prior to the war, there were about 8'000 Roma in that city.
- **Istog:** The Mahala Guraja-Rudes was cleaned and destroyed.
- **Gracanica:** Same story, the Roma houses were destroyed, and most Roma fled, a lot of them to Serbia.

The list is rather long. As a matter of fact, the majority of villages and towns have been cleaned.

### 3. Victims, Refugees and Refugees Camps

While the country has been to a large extent ethnically cleansed, and continues to be so, the actual number of Rroma victims is rather low (around 150 have been recorded). The situation is thus not the one of a holocaust, or even comparable to the one one has witnessed in Bosnia, with mass executions and mass graves. Rroma in Kosovo are being driven out, but not killed outright,

As such, many fled, and there is a general trend to be observed: The favourite countries are Germany, Switzerland, and Italy (with a substantial Gurbeti representation there), followed by Serbia, Macedonia, and some other ones. Saying that Rroma fled to Serbia is pouring oil on the fire of the Albanian propaganda that brands all Rroma as Serbian collaborators. In order to understand the why, one needs in part to look at the geography, with many of the Rroma from the north fleeing after 1999 towards Serbia, the closest haven. In other cases, the UNMIK itself was responsible. In Prizren, for example, some Rroma were stuck between the Serbs and Albanians, between the front lines, originally protected by the German KFOR. These Rroma, although they had nothing to do with the Serbs, being mostly pro-Albanian and Moslems, were nevertheless moved to Serbia, together with the Serbian minority in that part of town, under the auspices of the UNMIK.<sup>1</sup>

Seven years after the war, there are still refugee camps in Kosovo. While it is true that some ethnic Albanians also live in camps, the situation is by far better for them than for Rroma. The camps that still remain are for example Plementina, near Obilic, the four camps in Mitrovica, etc. In these camps, the situation is dire.

To take the example of Plementina, one needs first to note that this camp is located near the main power plant of the Kosovo. This plant is a coal burning plant, and as such, the entire environment is soiled by soot and sulphur. People are living in very bad conditions, in barracks. Needless to say, none of them is really receiving any help. No money, no food, no international organisations. This camp was originally guarded by the KFOR (Czech, at the end<sup>2</sup>), but the KFOR left three years ago. This camp was meant to be closed in 1999, which obviously did not occur. One has to say that the camp was far larger in 1999, and that in the meantime, many fled to various places. There are about 60 families in this camp. Currently, the only support that these Rroma get is given by Mother Theresa's association. We witnessed such a distribution. On average, each family gets a few kilograms of potatoes (usually around 2 to 3), ca. 10 kg. of bread, some beans, and this is it. For one month. The situation is bad enough, malnutrition, pollution, that several of the families we interviewed had lost family members in the last few years (either children or elderly people).

Rroma living in this camp come from various places: Prishtina, the nearby town of Obilic, but also from Lipjan, as well as from further away. Three facts need to be kept in mind, for they are very important:

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<sup>1</sup> Documents showing the situation prior to the evacuation are available. Nowadays, this part of town is totally burnt down, the churches and house having been gutted mostly during the 2004 events.

<sup>2</sup> Quite ironical, as the Czech are by and large rather racist towards Rroma.

- All of these Rroma had houses prior to the war
- All of these Rroma had jobs prior to the war, and, if they were not wealthy, were certainly not poor
- The large majority of these Rroma went to school, are well educated (one of them, a younger one, nearly immediately asked us for our email address). The exception are the Gurbeti, confirming the fact that these were generally less integrated in the society prior to the war.

As such, one is thus faced with a new phenomenon: The creation of de facto ghettos in this region, ghettos filled by people who were originally well integrated. Now, the near official propaganda states that these Rroma cannot integrate, that Kosovo is facing a situation akin to the one of Slovakia, and that one has a social problem at hand. This propaganda finds a good echo amongst many Western institutions. But this is nothing but a well thought lie.

The best analogy that comes to mind are movies of the Nazi propaganda during World War Two, showing the desolate state in which Jews were living in the ghettos that were assigned to them. The propaganda message there was a similar one: See how they live, how can one respect them? And this, in spite of the fact that all of them had jobs, education, something that nowadays seems obvious to all. The same holds true of Rroma in Kosovo. One has parked some of the remaining ones in ghettos, and we even heard that these Rroma do not want to move out ...

In spite of this, in spite of the difficulties, in spite of the fear (see below in the next sections), these Rroma are still sending their children to school. Speaking to them in Rromanes, for the majority of them speak that language, one realises how important this is to them. Education is the key, and these Rroma in the refugee camps do not need any help of programmes to understand or support this.

In Plementina, a house was recently built, financed by various NGOs and the UNMIK. This house, at the border of the camp is an apartment house, which now houses 34 families. It was inaugurated in rather large pomp, with television etc. towards the end of May 2006. To say that these Rroma live there is maybe to large a word.

First, the journalists were not told that this house has no water. Water is supposed to come later. In that respect, this is worse than most of the barracks who have at least running water in the house. Second, the process by which the families were chosen to receive a flat is rather obscure. Third, Rroma were given the keys, but have not necessarily moved in. This is due to the lack of water, but also to the fact that many of them are not used to flats in the first place, having lived in houses most of their lives, and due to the fact that the quarters are more cramped than the barracks.

Finally, and from our perspective, this is by far the most important fact, building this house straight in the camp, outside of the village, is a de facto recognition by the people who funded this project, that Rroma can no longer live within the community they lived in before the war. Many of these Rroma are from Obilic, the nearby town, and cannot return to their homes. They

are parked in either this camp or in this nice house, in a ghetto, without any prospects, and with exactly as little help as their brethren who live in the barracks.

Needless to say, one doesn't need to be a seer to foresee what will happen: This nice building, without water, overcrowded, will fall into disrepair, and the next message from the propaganda will be "see, we gave them a house, but they cannot adapt". The worse part is that the international community will nod, and do nothing.

One should not ignore the fact that these people are parked and segregated in their own town, and are, due to fear and attacks, constrained to their own ghetto, without work, without prospect.<sup>3</sup>

One old Rrom told us there

"It would have been better if they had killed us immediately".

The conditions in other refugee camps are similar if not worse. There was quite an outcry recently, as Rroma (mostly Gurbeti) were living in a camp that was severely polluted by lead, leading to the known health problems. This camp was moved to Recak, in a slightly better situation, but still a camp. The stories one can hear there are similar in nature. The worst off are the ones in the camps in Mitrovica. These ca. 2'000 Rroma live in bad conditions within the Serbian enclave.

We do wonder why, if the situation is as good as the Kosovo government and some Western governments claim, why these Rroma were not returned to their original communes, why they did not retrieve their former houses, why they couldn't return.

This is a central question when considering the situation of Rroma in Kosovo, and it seems that the international community has accepted the fact that displaced people will never be able to return.

#### **4. Where Are the Remaining Rroma?**

The remaining remnants of the Rroma population in Kosovo are found in various cities. The main remaining centre of Rroma life in Kosovo is currently Prizren, with ca. 5'000 of the original 12 to 15'000 Rroma who lived there prior to the war. We have mentioned Mitrovica, with ca. 2'000 Rroma, Pecs / Peje, with ca. 5'000 Rroma prior to the war and currently ca. 1'000 left; Gjakove, with quite a sizable Agyptian/Ashkali population and a few Arlii families, around 5'000 of the original 10-12'000; Urosevac/Ferizaj, with a large pre-war population and with currently ca. 500 Rroma left; Kamenica, with ca. 500 Rroma left nowadays, and so on.

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<sup>3</sup> As an interesting parallel, albeit over a longer time period, a very similar thing happened in Slovakia. Originally, Rroma were rather well integrated in the villages. Starting with Maria Theresa, Rroma were forced by law to live in settlements outside of the villages, called Osada. The communist regime compounded the problem by reducing the number of Osada (destroying nearly 90% of them) and creating even bigger ones as a result. The result one sees today are horrid conditions, no work, no education, dirt, etc. and most of all, no hope for an integration in the near or even far future. In Kosovo, we are witnessing the creation of such an underclass.

All in all, there are ca. 15 to 20'000 Rroma left in Kosovo currently. Quite a few are still leaving, due to the very difficult situation they are currently living in. Generally, the youngest ones are sent away by their families, as few can afford to go with their entire family abroad.

## **5. “Life” of the Remaining Kosovo Rroma**

### **a. Fear and Attacks**

Fear is the leitmotiv one hears when speaking to Rroma in Kosovo. Fear of being aggressed, fear that one's daughter might be raped, fear to speak one's own language out on the street or even within one's courtyard, in brief, due to this latent fear, many Rroma simply do not leave their own four walls. Thus, in more than a figurative way, the houses or street where Rroma live have turned themselves to prisons.

Only friends and family visit from time to time, but not at night, especially if one is of a darker complexion, and there, even during the day and in full view of the authorities, be they KFOR or KPS, one is often insulted, called “Magjyp” or even worse.

Some may say that this fear is irrational. Having lived with Rroma over a period of time in that region at the end of May 2006, we can say that this is far from irrational. The insults are common, the fear is omnipresent. In order not to be too obvious, we were, in many cases, walking 15 metres behind our guide, a Rrom, who, being quite well known in the quarter, preferred not to be associated with foreigners.

That this fear is not irrational but well founded is also a fact. Attacks against Rroma continue. In Prizren, one of the safest cities for Rroma, two young Rroma were beaten up in the street parallel to the Terzi Mahala the day prior to our arrival in that town. Their sin, they walked after dark in the street, a bastion of Albanian nationalists.

In the Mahala itself, a mob of Albanians descended at around 2:30 AM, in the middle of the night, knocking at doors, yelling insults, a picture reminiscent of the late Pogroms in Russia at the beginning of the XXth century.

Firebombing still occur, although less frequently, simply for the fact that many houses have already been torched, but one certainly feels, when living amongst Rroma in the region, that any small incident would be sufficient a pretext for another round of attacks and cleansing, as occurred in March 2004.

In another occurrence, Rroma were threatened, due to the fact that one was the victim of an accident, had to go to the hospital, was subsequently send to Belgrade for further treatment, and dared to ask for some compensation from the driver of the car who ran him over, a well connected Albanian, former UCK, now in the administration of the Kosovo. Needless to say, the family was threatened, and in view of the threats, they simply did not dare to go to court.

Children are particularly vulnerable. To such an extent that they are ostracized at school, no one speaks to them if it is known that they are Rroma, they are insulted, beaten up, and so on. One Rrom told us that they do not even dare to go and play football on the school football court, as they are at the mercy of even a small Albanian child who can tell them to leave. If they do not obey, war ensues, as the adults mix themselves in the thing. Another Rrom was member of a football club, was by all accounts quite gifted. He was expelled after having been insulted by his former team colleagues. And all this just because of ethnic appurtenance.

People are afraid for going out, some even pay non-Rroma to go shopping for them, for fear of being aggressed in the street. All avoid any contacts with the external world, as much as possible. We had to go through circuitous routes to meet many of the people that we met during our trip in Kosovo.

Rromanes, one of the vehicle of the identity is no longer spoken on the streets. It is still spoken amongst adults, but these do not teach it to their children. The reason: If the children speak Rromanes at school, they will be subjected to abuse, beaten, and so on. So this situation is slowly turning into a cultural genocide.

Another person we interviewed lost his business and narrowly escaped outright murder in Prishtina very recently. His child was knifed by Albanians, for no obvious reason other than his origin. And this in the “safest” place in Kosovo for Rroma.

#### **b. UNMIK and KFOR**

The usual argument one hears is that the KFOR and UNMIK do protect minorities against abuse. Well, fact is, they did not in 2004, they simply retreated into their own compounds and let the mob on the loose. This has not changed since then. One sees KFOR jeeps and Personnel Carriers all over the place in Kosovo, but seldom in Mahalas. And even if they are around, they do not intervene on aggressions against Rroma.

One exception needs to be noted here, the Turkish KFOR, especially in the town of Malisheva, a town with a substantial Turkish minority and quite a few Rroma, are protecting their brethren, and, as a consequence, also the Rroma living there.

All our Rroma contacts told us it is useless and hopeless to try to contact either the KFOR or the UNMIK for help. Rroma are turned down. This often occurs as the interpreters for these forces are themselves ethnic Albanians, and are either not translating accurately, as we have been told (by one Rrom who spoke perfect German but did not say so) and as we have observed ourselves in other circumstances, or are simply dismissing any claims by Rroma, simply based on their origin.

In one case, one Rrom, managed to meet a doctor from the German KFOR for someone of his family. He speaks perfect German, English, Turkish, Albanian, Serbo-Croatian. The German doctor, impressed with the qualifications, decide to hire him on the spot as a translator. The day before he was supposed to start, the Albanians who worked there threatened to kill him should he take his job. Needless to say, he did not take it.

Nevertheless, all Rroma (Arlii, Gurbeti, Ashkali, etc.) said that if the KFOR leaves, then they'd rather kill themselves than wait for the Albanians to do so. So, the KFOR does provide a bit of protection to minorities, but in fact, not directly, but rather in preventing a new open outbreak of ethnic cleansing. After all, as said, in 2004, they merely acted as spectators

The attitude we documented in our previous report in 2005, whereby the KFOR never intervened on behalf of Rroma, even for putting out a fire, and told our representative, that "Let those houses burn, even better with the people inside" has not really changed.

### **c. KPS – Kosovo Police Service**

One of the favourite items and sentence used by the Swiss Federal Department for Refugees, the BFM (Bundesamt für Migration) is that the new Kosovo Police Force, the KPS, has members of ethnic minorities, and is everywhere to be seen ("Flächendeckend und gut sichtbar"). We must admit that this latter statement is perfectly true, if one refers to the roads in Kosovo. These are well patrolled, there are controls by the KPS. However, we can testify that this presence of Police is more than absent in the places where Rroma live.

There are a few members of minorities within the KPS. Most of them were already policemen under the communist regime, but one must say there are so few of them, that their presence is more of an alibi than a fact. Albanians say that they cannot recruit Rroma policemen, as there are not enough Rroma who have the required education.

In view of the number of Rroma who actually finished high school or even university, this excuse is quite an obvious lie. Besides, working as a minority member in a force that encompasses many former UCK members is not an easy thing. What can they do for their own?

### **d. Social Services, Pensions, etc.**

Rroma have no access to social services, this is a fact. In many cases, when referred to hospital, they were not admitted. Some had to borrow money to send their ill family members to Belgrade instead, for otherwise they would not have had access to treatment.

Several women who had to give birth in a hospital told us that they had trouble getting examined by doctors, that, when giving birth, were barely treated, for example, that in case of some difficult births, no anaesthesia was available, and so on. In addition, all said that they were subject to general derogatory comments, most of them extremely racist, and so on. All this while being required to pay for this "treatment".

Other type of help, for example for medication, is not available. We have seen several cases of people whose treatment required medication for a sum in excess of 40 Euro, the average pension. Seeing a doctor is not possible without money. And then, all agreed, you have to find one who is willing to treat a Rrom. Many simply don't want to.

Pensions are hard to get at. In fact, it seems that many Rroma who worked for years prior to the war are not receiving it. Officially, this is because they cannot provide the correct documents, and because there is a large backlog of cases. Effectively, it is as if Rroma are simply shunted out in favour of the Albanian majority.

The same is true for social help. There is none. In all places we have been to and with all people we have discussed with, none received any help from the Kosovo government or UNMIK. Several have applied for it, some very recently, and all have been turned down. In one case that we interviewed, he was insulted and kicked out of the office even before he could actually present his case.

#### **e. School and University**

We have already said that Rroma children are being ostracised, insulted, or even beaten up in school. Nevertheless, the vast majority of Rroma are actively trying to send their children to school. In some cases, the Turkish schools are a sought after alternative to the usual Albanian schools, when and where available. In many cases, especially when the children are adolescent, the situation becomes so critical that parents no longer can send them to school. In any case, continuing for higher education is a difficult challenge. First, the university is in Prishtina, a city that is not safe for Rroma. Second, admission to the university is subject to kickbacks. Basically the deans are asking for money to accept someone at the university. The sum, by Kosovo standard is rather large (in the thousands of euros in some cases), and even with kickbacks, Rroma are not accepted.

So many young Rroma who completed high school, for there are many, are sitting idle at home, denied their rights to a higher education just based on their ethnic appurtenance.

#### **f. Law**

There may be a law in Kosovo, but there certainly isn't one when one is Rrom, is how one could summarise the actual situation in the region. People do not dare to report attacks, for fear that their names will be told to the person who attacked them. When one person dares to report an attack to the police, he or she is usually threatened very shortly thereafter and told to drop his complaint. If it comes to court, witnesses are subjected to the same pressures, and false testimonies are quite common. This state of affairs was described shortly in an article in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*<sup>4</sup>, which underlines the fact that neither the police nor judges are showing any interest in arresting and condemning people for attacks against minorities. The NZZ also lambastes the UNMIK for its incapability of doing anything to prevent attacks and to see that these are prosecuted, and for the fact that the many different agencies are not coordinated, not compatible, and full of "arrogant" international workers.

How can this be, if, as we have mentioned earlier, the chief prosecutor of Prizren is a Rrom? Shouldn't he at least do something? He knows about the problems, knows many of the people who have been beaten, whose houses have been burnt or confiscated. But he cannot do anything.

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<sup>4</sup> See Kosovos Mühe mit demokratischen Standards. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 10/11 Mai 2006.

No complaints, no judgement. And the actions occur outside of the court of law. So he deals with usual cases of burglary, petty criminality, and so on. Interestingly enough, Rroma are quite absent as petty criminals and totally absent in jails, at least in Prizren, this according to the prosecutor. It seems that criminality is not really ingrained amongst Rroma, in spite of the difficult conditions they live in.

It is quite symptomatic that up until now, no attacks against Rroma have been condemned by the courts.

### **g. Returning Refugees**

In spite of the assurances of many Western countries that returning refugees are taken care of, this is once again far from the truth. In all cases we have met, one having returned as late as February 2006 from Germany, all told the same story. They were brought back to Prishtina, handed out some money, and told to fend for themselves.

There is no infrastructure ready to greet returning refugees. No housing, no help, no follow-up, simply nothing is available for returning Rroma refugees. One of the ones we interviewed spent 13 months in Plementina before being able to find his family. In addition, in two cases we met, the people did neither speak Albanian nor Serbo-Croatian. In both cases, they spoke a bit of Rromanes and excellent German.

As a result, they end up in crowded accommodations – ca. 20 people in two rooms, or in unsanitary conditions, without heating, without water inside, this, in spite of having had property in Kosovo prior to the war.

## **6. Property**

Property claims are a sore point that is far from being resolved. As we have already said, in many places, Rroma houses and quarters have simply been obliterated. No traces thereof remain, and Albanians are building houses or businesses on those ruins. As a result, it is quite obvious that it is nearly impossible for most Rroma to claim their property back.

Property titles are seldom in the possession of Rroma. The official Albanian line on that matter is that Rroma built their houses illegally on property that did not belong to them. This may be the case in some instances, but more often, it is simply a reflection of the fact that they were subjected to the same treatment as Albanians under Milosevic and could not get such papers. In addition, many registers have disappeared or been “lost”. This means that many Rroma are simply no longer existent in that region. This was confirmed to us in several instances, whereby we asked the Kosovo authorities and UNMIK to certify that a given person had indeed been born in a given town or village. In most cases, we did possess a copy of a birth certificate, and in most cases, we were totally unsuccessful, meaning that no official traces of those people remained in Kosovo.

In some cases, Roma “sold” their houses. The sale is in some case a genuine one, having been concluded prior to 1999. After that, such sales are often of dubious nature. People were either coerced to sell, or simply, their property was taken, end of the story.

While we were in Prizren, some Albanians came to see one of the people we met while we were there and asked him to rent the separated flat that he has in his house. This is a typical occurrence, or so we were told. Rent is paid one or two months, and then no longer, and next thing happening, the Roma are out. The story has been occurring sufficiently many times to understand the anguish of that person. Saying no is difficult, if possible at all.

In other cases, one of which we are following since a few years, the Roma are in full possession of their property papers. But Albanians live in their house and openly acknowledge that these Roma lived there before. This in official statement (i.e. Red Cross, UNMIK). But in those very same statement, it was also said that the security of the family could not be guaranteed if they chose to return to their home.

We have witnessed cases whereby the Albanians living in a house formerly occupied by Roma, as well as their neighbours swore that there never ever had been Roma living in that place before. In yet another case, when visiting a Roma house in a nationalist Albanian quarter, a house that was burnt down and recently burglarised, the situation became more than menacing, and we had to leave. For the owner of this house, there is absolutely no way of living there.

There is a new initiative (See the section on the official Albanian position) whereby the property rights will be arranged. The idea is to allow people who have no formal claims or proof thereof to be granted some official documents attesting that they lived in that place, and allow them to retrieve property. We are of the opinion that the first test of this new policy should be in Prishtina itself. For if it doesn't work there, how could one expect this to work in more remote villages?

## **7. Surviving**

Euro is the official currency of Kosovo. A kilo of potatoes costs between 0.30 and 0.50 cent, sometimes less if in season. Buying tomatoes, some pasta, onions, garlic, bread, peppers, this in rather modest quantities, quantities commensurate with feeding a family of 6 people, we spent 15 Euro. Not much by Western standard, but one needs to keep in mind that a school teacher has a monthly salary of 140 Euro, and a pension is around 40 Euro per month.

All Kosovo is in this situation. The difference is that, while the overall unemployment in Kosovo hovers around 55%, nearly all Roma are by now unemployed. And furthermore they have no chance of finding a new job, especially now that all has been privatised in Kosovo. They have no chance of finding a job because they are Roma, because they are too dark, and because no one wants them. In addition, as we have said above, many of them do not receive pensions. This means that without any social help, they somehow have to survive.

Some do some small jobs, selling trinkets on the market, not their usual occupation, some play music at weddings, some work for Albanians, but then, as we were repeatedly told, they are at the mercy of their boss. Sometimes they are not paid at all, sometimes they receive something to eat, and sometimes, 2 or 3 Euro for their work.

Thus, from a well integrated and rather wealthy population, the Rroma in Kosovo have become the poorest among this society. Were it not for relative or friends who live in other countries and who send whatever they can on an irregular basis, no Rrom could survive currently in Kosovo. One of them told us that, should the payments from abroad cease for more than two month, one would have a hunger problem, and that with no payments for three months, they'd be all dead or would have fled the country.

## **8. Why Don't they Say So**

One of the frequently asked questions is why do Rroma not say what their real situation is when asked by journalists and international NGOs. As a matter of fact, there are even several presidents or so-called representatives of Rroma who say that all is well for Rroma in the region, that there are no problems. These testimonies are paraded through television, and are seldom questioned.

In view of what we have seen and observed, one can readily understand why Rroma are not openly stating the obvious. If someone comes with an Albanian translator, if in addition there is a camera, all Rroma stated that they would of course say that there are no problems, no issues, that all is well in the best of the world. Wouldn't anybody do the same? Faced with fear of reprisal, faced with threats, not only against oneself but against one's family, and in view of the fact that Rroma are still regularly beaten up without any consequences, one doesn't say anything that deviates from the official line.

Even the presidents and representatives, when asked the very same question within four walls and in Rromanes give very different answers, as we can testify. This is slowly changing, as some of the Rroma representatives are by now emboldened enough to actually say that the situation in Kosovo is dismal and that Rroma refugees cannot be returned to the region.

## **9. Rroma representatives**

There are Rroma representatives in Kosovo. One of them even sits in the parliament. How did this happen and how did they arrive at their position? Well, one thing is sure. None of them was elected democratically, few of them are actually representative. In addition, their semi-official position puts them in a very sensitive position, forcing them to state that the situation for Rroma is quite ideal if not idyllic in Kosovo, all the while knowing this not to be the case.

The fact that Western organisations, when dealing with Rroma seem to seek such presidents instead of looking for people in need adds to their might within the community. They are the

recipients of the meagre help that is given to Rroma, and the temptation is great to bestow this help to friends or family.

There is a general anger amongst Rroma against such presidents. This is especially felt when discussing the distribution of help or money, when discussing the statements they made, and many Rroma in the street, as we can testify, are angry at their so-called representative and have been asking us how they could be taken as such by the international community.

Finally, we would like to say that having one Rrom in the Parliament in Prishtina is nothing but an alibi exercise. What can a single Rrom do against the majority? He alienates himself from his own community, as he cannot do anything for them all the while serving the usual propaganda whereby things cannot be so bad if there is a Rrom in the parliament. We would like to question the validity of this approach and question how the international community can condone it. After all, would, say France or Germany reserve a few seats in parliament for Jews? Would that not generate an outcry?

#### **IV. THE KOSOVO ALBANIAN VIEW**

The Kosovo Albanian official view hasn't changed much in the last year. True, the independence of Kosovo requires lip service to the fate of minorities, but if one digs a bit below the surface, one always finds the same stereotypes and views, if not policies.

We had the chance to meet one of the most prominent activists amongst Kosovo Albanians, Mr. Ibrahim Makolli. He heads the Council of Human Right in Kosovo, has been active since the Milosevic times in Human Rights, was jailed several times, and by all standards has a softer view than what could be expected say, from former UCK commandants or from the man on the street.

Speaking to him was highly enlightening. According to Mr. Makolli, Rroma left Kosovo voluntarily. They left together with the Serbian troops, as they had anyhow been collaborating with the Serbs, especially during the Milosevic regime. As a proof thereof, we were told that he personally had seen Rroma with weapons, terrorising Albanian civilians. This may very well have happened, and we do not wish to question his testimony in this particular case. However, we have seen repeatedly that Albanians have accused Rroma of murdering some of their relatives, sometimes in cases where the accused Rrom had not even been in the country at the time of the purposed incident. In fact, while there have been cases of Rroma working with Serbs, digging trenches, or even carrying weapons (the fire brigade, for example, was armed with automatic weapons by the Serbs), actual documented cases whereby Rroma actively took part in the Serbian repression against Albanians are nearly if not totally unknown. In addition, as we have documented, many Rroma actually took the Albanian side under Milosevic and lost their jobs, exactly as the Albanians did.

This position also doesn't reflect the fact that many Rroma fled the country in 1999 together with the Albanians, as is documented<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> There is a reportage of the Swiss television from 1999 that documents the fate of Rroma who fled to Macedonia in 1999 together with the Albanians.

Rroma of course, stole from the Albanians after the war. This is more plausible and will readily be accepted by many a Westerner, for this fits in the common clichés on Rroma. While this may have occurred, especially in cases where the Rroma families did not leave their houses during the most difficult times of the war, and as such had to somehow survive, plundering of houses was not the norm. And even if it occurred, one should say that many Rroma houses were plundered by Albanians, and continue to be so, as we have seen for example in Prizren very recently.

According to Mr. Makolli, there were ca. 60'000 Rroma before the war, now 10'000 – but this is not ethnic cleansing, or so we were told. That these numbers are highly dubious is presented in a section above. Nevertheless, claiming, according to the given numbers, however inexact they are, that no ethnic cleansing took place in Kosovo requires some intellectual gymnastic that we cannot understand. When we asked how it is possible that we have more Rroma refugees in Western Europe than the actual official number of Rroma in the country before the war, we were told that many Albanians actually say they are Rroma when they are in Western Europe to avoid being repatriated to Kosovo. While the odd case may have happened, we retorted that it was quite amazing to us that there were that many Albanians that are fluent in Rromanes, which concluded the discussion on that topic.

Rroma are a social problem. This is a new development, a development that finds a very positive echo amongst international organisation. In view of the actual integration of Rroma in the region, and in view of their level of education, this view is in fact trying to hide the reality. In the last seven years, one has discriminated, one has ostracised the Rroma, and one has parked them in ghettos.

We were told that all minorities should be able to return to Kosovo, even the Serbs. But, following the visit in a town near Prizren of several Serbs who used to live there, riots ensued, and the KFOR had to forcefully intervene to restore order. This shows, and there Mr. Makolli agrees, that quite a lot of time needs to pass before all former Kosovo residents can return to their homes.

Add to this that the “kanun”, the blood feud, seems to still be active and present in villages throughout Kosovo. We were told of one recent case of such a feud near Prizren. This means that Rroma, having been accused and branded Serbian collaborators, are at high risk, especially if they were actually forced to work for the Serbians under Milosevic.

There will be, we were told, a new law and procedure to help people access their land titles and help them retrieve papers of residency. There will be some interesting tests to that policy, as we have written in the section on Property. Also interesting to watch will be the granting of Kosovo papers to ethnic minorities in the case of the independence of the region.

While this is by far not the official policy of the Kosovo government, this is the quite general prevailing view in Kosovo. Kosovo is in most minds only for Albanians. Minorities have lost nothing there and will not be accepted.

The few common sentences we cited in our last report,

- “Kosovo belongs to the Albanians”
- “When Kosovo becomes independent, all Gypsies will have to go”
- “Rroma lie and they helped the Serbs during the war”

shows that nothing has really changed in the last year, in spite of the reassurances of the contrary by many people. The message is still clear: Rroma (Arlii, Gurbeti, Ashkali, etc.) have nothing to do in Kosovo. They will have to leave. And this is an open message, for all to be heard. Of course, the official version of this message is encompassed in more measured views.. We heard from some officials, that all could return, provided they had not collaborated with the Serbs during the war.

## **V. DISCRIMINATION FROM OUTSIDE**

The Albanian views of Rroma and the conflict in Kosovo have repercussions outside of the region. In fact, the same views and sometimes the same situation occur in third countries, for example in Switzerland. We can document several verbal attacks against Rroma, one case of sexual assault, and some cases of beatings, all this from Albanians currently living in that country. This is by far not the only place where the conflict spills over its borders.

The new approach we cited above, namely that Rroma are a social problem that needs to be addressed as such, is a common mantra in certain circles when speaking about countries such as Slovakia or Romania. That Kosovo is now added to the list by well-intentioned Western organisation is actually outright discrimination besides being utterly dangerous. It is not a reflection of the true nature of the current problem, and means that the wrong solution to it will be applied.

We cannot but ask as to why Rroma are not helped. Why aren't there Rroma working for the various NGOs, for the UNMIK, or why are there so few of them? It seems as if no one wanted to hear about their fate. One currently speaks a lot about minorities in Kosovo, but rarely mentions any other than the Serbian one. In that, Rroma, as the Gorani, Turks, etc. are simply not acknowledged.

## **VI. OUTLOOK**

Ethnic cleansing is still going on in Kosovo. The ultimate goal being to have a homogenous Kosovo, i.e. an ethnic Albanian one, a region will soon become independent, a fact that nearly all Western governments agree upon.

The KFOR and UNMIK are still at best the guarantor of the status quo. Their presence is just preventing an outright cleansing of the region, most notably of its Serbian minority, but is by far

not preventing intimidation and a “case by case” eviction of other minorities: Rroma, Gorani, etc. Rroma live in fear, in fear of their lives, property, children, and still have no future in the region. Economically, they are kept on the rim, and this, in spite of the fact that in Kosovo, they were very well integrated in the society at large.

Western countries, more often than not, have argued that the ethnic cleansing of Rroma from Kosovo does not constitute a State sponsored repression, and thus Rroma cannot be recognized as true refugees. This approach is not acceptable. When an entire region is being emptied of its minorities, and this in full view and under the “protection” of the NATO, the United Nations, and nothing is being done, not only do the governments have a moral obligation to help, but they have to acknowledge that their policies failed, and that they are faced with the risk of having many more refugees in the near future.

Should Kosovo become independent, a fate that is supported even by Switzerland, one cannot but ask what will become of the remaining Rroma in the region. It is fairly clear that if the KFOR leaves, they will be evicted. But if the KFOR stays, this will most probably nevertheless happen. One can thus on the one hand expect case by case eviction, where single families are targeted and kicked out as well as a repeat of events such as the ones of March 2004. Such events need almost no pretext to occur.

Parking minorities in ghettos, however practical this may be from a military perspective, is not a solution to the problem. In fact, this policy actually condones the ethnic cleansing that already occurred.

In view of the current situation, in view of the lack of progress, we cannot but say that Rroma have no future in Kosovo. Rroma refugees certainly cannot return to their country, and the ones that remain will eventually flee. This is a fact, and very little can be done to prevent a further deterioration of the situation.