

THE SITUATION OF RROMA IN KOSOVO AN UPDATE

Rroma Foundation
February 2005

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a known fact that Rroma, used here in its general meaning, have been ethnically cleansed from the Kosovo. This ethnic cleansing took place shortly after the war, and is continuing to this day. While it is extremely difficult to say how many Rroma used to live in Kosovo prior to the war, their number was upwards 300,000. The last official census, held in 1991, did not provide accurate numbers, and did not specifically cover Kosovo. The numbers stemming from this census cannot be used at all. Empirical evidence suggests that many Rroma, most notably Arlii, did declare themselves as being Albanians in this census, this partly due to pressure from the Albanian nationalists. In fact, from a rather representative sample of Rroma from the region, it seems that only some Gurbeti did in fact get counted as being Rroma. And these were by far the minority (around 10% maximally of all Rroma in the Kosovo). Historical facts, such as various censuses and tax register from the Ottoman Empire, suggest that the Rroma population in the Kosovo was relatively stable at around 18-20% of the overall population. These were mostly sedentary, working as farmers, factory workers, doctors, lawyers, schoolteachers, etc.

There are currently less than 40'000 Rroma left in the Region, and probably even less. Again, there are no accurate numbers, as there is no accurate census, but this is a generally agreed number amongst NGOs and UNO. This de facto ethnic cleansing has not ceased. We have had reports of attacks, constant threats, beatings, rapes, and one occurrence, the events of March 2004, even made it to the press. During those riots, Rroma houses were burned down, people forced to flee in what can only be qualified as a concerted action, for some of the people taking part in those riots were actually bussed to their destination.

Our Rroma contacts in the region told us that few if any NGOs accurately report on their situation. On the one hand, people tend to come with an official translator, i.e. an ethnic Albanian, which in view of the climate of fear that exists prevents any accurate description of the actual situation. This climate of fear is so prevalent that several good contacts simply refused to give us the co-ordinates of family members that still remain in Kosovo, for fear for their safety. And some of these people, who now live in Switzerland or Germany, also feared for their families and themselves, for beatings do occur, even in quiet Switzerland.

This state of fear, fear for one safety, fear for one's life and family is described in the report of our representative that spent a week in Kosovo in January 2005. He travelled alone, did meet Rroma in their homes, and, although this representative did not speak Rromanes, there are enough Rroma in the region who speak either German, Italian, or even English.

All names and places have been removed from this report for obvious security reasons.

II. ROMA, ASHKALI, EGYPTIANS

1. Ongoing Confusion

It is an ongoing fact that the various organisations working with Rroma, used here as a general terminology for the various groups that are found in Kosovo, never cease to seem baffled at the various names given to Rroma, and or the various groups self-appellation.

So, in various reports, one finds terminology such as RAE, shorthand for “Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians”, and the users of this terminology are unfortunately utterly convinced of its accuracy and of its general coverage of all Gypsies in Kosovo.

Alas, this is far from being the case. First and foremost, it is a politically correct construct akin to saying “French and Parisians”, or “Swiss and Baslers”. On the one hand, the use of Roma in this context, a term that is used to describe all of them, is not accurate, hence our description of “Swiss and Baslers”. On the other hand, as we will see, this terminology covers only three groups of Rroma in the region, and thus, excludes a large part of the Rroma population itself in the region. De facto, in this incorrect terminology, Roma is used here for Gurbeti only. But, in terms of self-appellation, Arlii will not necessarily declare themselves as Rroma in the first place, preferring their group appurtenance (Arlii), and this group is the one that used to be the largest in Kosovo.

We have already reported over the origins of the names of Egyptians and Ashkali, and we refer the reader to the foundation’s report on that subject. Needless to say, both groups are recent ones, and, if some or even the majority of their members do not speak Rromanes, there are enough that do, showing that these too are Rroma.

2. Rroma

So what are these groups? Per se, Rroma are divided into groups. Those groups created themselves over the centuries either through migration to another country (for example, the Sinti in Germany, and their descendants, the Polska Roma of Poland), or by a profession or geographical circumscription.

In the case of the Balkan in General and Kosovo in particular, historically, one finds four main groups. The *Arlii*, from the Turkish *yerli* (local); the *Prilep Arlii*, a group closely related to the preceding one, located mainly in the Prilep region, both groups being originally mainly blacksmiths; the *Bugurdži*, also often called *Kovači* whose original profession may have had something to do with drills; and the *Gurbeti*, this latter group being a late arrival in the region, as their appearance in the Ottoman Empire dates from the XVIIth century, and who were originally semi-nomadic and more often than not buying and selling goods or otherwise being closer to the usual clichés on Rroma.

The Arlii, Prilep Arlii, and the Bugurdži are and have been sedentary for centuries. Again, notwithstanding the usual clichés that are ever and ever again used in the press, these Rroma were

not “force-settled”, but settled, probably around the IXth century in what was still then the Byzantine Empire. To combat clichés by some more picturesque argumentation, being blacksmith, a forge and the tools of the trade are not that readily transported in a cart... All historical sources agree, and there were no nomadic Rroma in the late Byzantine and early Ottoman Empire, at least until the arrival of the Gurbeti. This group fled the slavery in Romania and arrived in the Ottoman Empire in the late XVIIIth century.

To add confusion in this otherwise clear-cut group appurtenance, there are first subgroups, such as the *Arabajdži*, a subgroup of the Bugurdži, as well as an use of the term “Rrom” purely associated with Rroma who came from Romania, so-called Vlax Rroma, in our case, the Gurbeti. Vlax Rroma generally prefer to refer to themselves as simply “Rrom”, or even as “le Rrom le čače”, the “true” Rroma, while referring to the other non-Vlax groups either by their group names (i.e. Arlii) or by some condescending appellation (for example, Kalderaša tend to refer to other Rroma under the general term of *Poljača* [Poles]). To add a few short examples of this strong emphasis of the use of “Rrom” exclusively for Vlax Rroma, a Kalderaš, whose father settled in the Kosovo in the early XXth century, said the reason of this choice was that there were no Rroma there, in this case, meaning no other Kalderaša. In another case, a Gurbet told us once that an Arlii was not a Rrom, which in his view of the term was technically correct – being Vlax he uses this only for Vlax Rroma, i.e. Gurbeti mostly in Kosovo, which Arlii are.

So, to summarise, when someone presents or refers to himself as being Rrom in Kosovo, chances are that it is a Gurbeti, for Arlii usually prefer to refer to themselves by this name only.

This leaves us with the other two more recent formations, the Ashkali and Egyptians. While the usage of Egyptians in conjunction with Rroma is rather old, having, after all given rise to the term of Gypsies, Egypt and Rroma are not connected at all. This group started gaining prominence in the 1960s, after the visit of Nasser in Yugoslavia. Ashkali are even more recent and, as we have already argued, are the result of a conscious political manipulation from the Milosevic regime to split an otherwise unified community.¹ Some of the members of these groups are probably originally Rroma who had lost their cultural identity and language, but, upon questioning the elder members of those communities, we found that a large part of them were originally (and until quite recently) Bugurdži (or Kovači) or even Arlii.

3. Political Correctness

So, rather than engage in some dubious kind of political correctness, we refer to all these groups as Rroma, and do mention, whenever applicable, their group appurtenance. For Rroma they are, at least in the eyes of the Albanians and Serbs, for whom they are just Gypsies...

¹ Laederich, Stéphane. Rroma, Ashkali, Egyptians. A Kosovo Peculiarity? Rroma Foundation Reports, April 2000.

III. THE CURRENT SITUATION OF RROMA IN KOSOVO

1. Prologue

We organised meetings herein Zurich with our representative and various Rroma (Arlii, Gurbeti, Ashkali) prior to the departure. This allowed our representative to first meet Rroma, for it was his first contact, and to obtain addresses and phone numbers of various people he would meet. In addition, and this in view of the situation in the region, an introduction is always necessary. Prior to this meeting, he had been extensively briefed on the situation of Rroma in the region, and had quite a bit of other information, reports from NGOs, etc. In spite of this briefing, he himself stated later that he found the “description exaggerated” but that in fact “reality turned out to be far worse”.

In our representative’s word, this encounter made a strong impression:

“Already in Switzerland, I could feel the naked fear. For the first time in my life, I encountered people, here in Switzerland, fearful for their security and the security of their loved ones, and who were extremely cautious about me. Only after telling them why I was going to Kosovo, and only when the Rroma Foundation guaranteed them that no names would ever appear, did they dare to speak about the situation of Rroma in Kosovo. I was extremely impressed by what these people told, for it was by far more dramatic than what I had heard earlier from the Rroma Foundation.”

Through these Rroma from Switzerland, he obtained several phone numbers and introductions to various Rroma in Kosovo. However, no addresses were given, and one of the Rroma who attended these sessions bluntly refused to give either the address or the phone number of family members still living in Kosovo.

With these contacts, our representative left for Kosovo on his own. He had contacts amongst Arlii, Gurbeti, Ashkali, and managed to meet some Egyptians while in the region.

2. Meetings with Rroma

As an example of the complications and the fear that is entailed in meeting with a foreigner in the region, our representative described us a typical meeting:

“I announced my visit per phone and once I was in that town, I had to call again. My contact absolutely insisted that I should come alone, without any translator, without anyone, not even KFOR or UNMIK. We agreed to meet in a neutral place. Once there, my contact approached me after having observed me for a long while. Actually, it was quite obvious to me at the time that he must be it, as he was acting in a very cautious if not fearful manner. Once the contact was established, he asked me to follow him, but to walk a few meters behind him. He took a tortuous path to his house, and when I left his home, I found that there was a much shorter and direct way.

In the flat, his wife and children welcomed me. Above all, they first spoke about their son, sixteen years old. He currently lives in Germany, had to be spirited out of the country, for he was constantly beaten up and threatened by Albanians. My contact works in the administration, earns ninety Euro per month, is educated, but cannot send his children to school because they are beaten again and again. He told me that it was better to die than to live like this.

The family was totally integrated prior to the war, never had any problems with Albanians.²

His wife told me that she was not treated at the hospital, just because she is a Rromni. She said she was currently in need of psychiatric help, mostly because of her son in Germany, and because there is no way out, no hope for the other children. She added she would leave, even walk away, if she could only do so. But it is a matter of money, for it costs to leave.”

Most meetings, be it with Gurbeti, Arlii, Ashkali, or Egyptians, had a similar ring. Always a phone appointment, a meeting in an open space, then another place, then a circuitous route. And the statements heard from the various Rroma were consistent:

Our representative heard them over and over in various places and among various groups. Children cannot go to school, are threatened, are beaten up, are sent back by the teachers, under the excuse that one cannot guarantee their security. In one case, the parents themselves were beaten up. He also repeatedly heard that Albanian children should not touch Rroma children, for fear of getting soiled. Albanian children say they “are” the UCK, and for that reason, they need to beat Rroma up. And this, also in the case of Ashkali, who are reputedly more “accepted” by Albanian.

Rroma from all groups told our representative that they slept with their clothes on, for fear of being kicked out in the middle of the night, as it often still occurs.

All spoke of the impossibility of obtaining medication, of getting medical treatment. In the words of one Ashkali in Kosovo: “If there is an accident and an Albanian and a Ashkali need medical attention, only the Albanian will be treated. The Ashkali must first show that he can pay”. One Ashkali was removed from the hospital because he could no longer afford the treatment. Others told that without money, nothing would ever happen.

Most Rroma are too afraid to go out, even in full daylight. In some cases, they send non-Rroma to go shopping.

Rroma are currently either not registered, or the registrations have either disappeared or have been destroyed. Part of the official records from the Kosovo were taken by the Serbs at the end of the War and are in Serbia, in Kragujevac. In any case, the result is the same: without registration, no school, no work, no medical assistance, no future. In fact, it is even worse, as this also means that the land deeds and property documents are impossible to obtain. Without those, claims on the land and houses are impossible to prove. And there have been many cases of

² This family is Arlii.

Rroma who were forced to leave their houses, this even recently, and who of course could not even prove that the house belonged to them.

3. KFOR and UNMIK

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. This is best seen and was observed during the March 2004 riots. The KFOR did not intervene to protect the Rroma, in fact, even closed its gates on people that were seeking a refuge. So in that case, they were solely spectators of the events and did not arrive until after the deed was done.

Our representative documented this passive behaviour in the protection of Rroma. On the one hand, Rroma told him that the KFOR never intervened to put out a fire, even though it has the means to do so, and on the other hand, he heard from some KFOR members themselves "Let those houses burn, even better with the people inside".

While this may have been the utterance of a few soldiers, it is nevertheless reflective of a general attitude than can be observed in the facts.

4. Rroma Politicians

One Rrom told our representative that his wish was to be able to go to together with somebody from the Rroma Foundation in front of those "Rroma Presidents" and tell them what he thinks of them, all the while taking into account that such a bold step might get him killed.

Fact is, the "representatives" of the various Rroma groups (if there are any), are not exactly revered within their community, and this behind closed doors. Theirs is a difficult position: Officially, and this under Albanian pressure, all is best and cannot be better, while officiously, as we can testify, they do tell another story. But the sheer fact that these misstatements are made officially angers quite a few members of their own communities.

Again here, one can only wonder at the naïveté of the various NGOs and Governmental institutions. For, the natural first question is and should be legitimacy of the representation. And this legitimacy is quite often unsatisfactory. Even when there is legitimacy, and there are such cases, one cannot but ask what such an officially enshrined person can do for its community.

5. Albanians and Rroma

A few sentences, commonly heard among Albanians are representative of the general attitude:

- "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"

The last statement, almost a mantra, has been used by Albanian nationalists to justify ethnic cleansing. And this even though many Rroma did actually support the UCK, morally and financially, at least until the end of the war.

The message is actually clear: Rroma (Arlui, 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 such as the ones stating that only those who worked for the Serbs during the war have anything to fear from the Albanians...

IV. CONCLUSION

Ethnic cleansing is still going on in Kosovo. The ultimate goal being to have an homogenous Kosovo, i.e. an ethnic Albanian one, a region that can then become independent. The KFOR and UNMIK are, 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, if fear of their lives, property, children, and 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 the Kosovo does not constitute a State sponsored repression, and thus shunting Rroma out of an official refugee status, this approach is no longer acceptable. Kosovo has its own regional government. That several members of this very government are being investigated by the tribunal in den Hague is symptomatic of the fact that the current repression against Rroma is in fact state-sponsored. And this in full view of the international community that, at least for the time being seems to be at loss of any way out and that currently seems more concerned about its well-being than about the well being of the people they were meant to protect in the first place.

The “chosen” solution, the one of protected enclaves, as for the Serbs in some cities, is not a solution, for it actually constitutes an explicit acceptance of the ethnic cleansing. When one thinks, and this in the case of the Serbian minority, that most of the Serbs lived in villages all over the region, one can fathom the absurdity of such an approach. This approach doesn’t work for Rroma either. After the events of March 2004, some Rroma (Gurbeti and Arlui) were put in a camp within the perimeter a KFOR camp. Needless to say, few if any NGOs have visited them. There, according to our sources in the region, they are de facto internees. They cannot go out, are confined within the boundaries of this camp. One cannot but ask if this was the reason for the KFOR intervention...

So, 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.