

*The long road to independence*

***A poker called Kosovo***

*It was the poorest and most forgotten region of Yugoslavia. But here the criminal policy that brought horrors that seemed forgotten to the heart of Europe. Poised between revenge and forgiveness, Albanians and Serbs try to become European citizens.*

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The game is not yet over, but it jogs on more and more wearily. The main protagonists, starting from Ibrahim Rugova and Slobodan Milosevic, the good and the bad, are no longer there. Hundreds of thousands of people in the meantime changed their lives, by emigrating, moving, starting from scratch. Others still seek justice, truth, or at least, they want to know what happened to their children, parents, siblings, swallowed up by violence during the cruelest game of poker played by politics in contemporary Europe.

Kosovo. Completely ignored by everyone for decades, then become familiar in the geography of conflict. A name to open the evening news, a name remaining in the history, because there was a "war for Kosovo", otherwise known as "humanitarian war". It seems ages ago, but it happened only seven years ago: people went to see the brand new show of bombers taking off from European military bases, on that sad spring of 1999.

Certainly, there was no shortage of images, in the immense tragedy of former Yugoslavia.

The horror was reduced to a TV show, because the facts, responsibilities, agreements, (collectively, the truth), were systematically hidden, distorted, interpreted in a partial and tendentious way. Kosovo, a green plateau surrounded by snow-covered mountains in direction of the Adriatic Sea, which seems far but it is not, returned to its media slumber, waiting for independence in the near future amid general indifference. And all in all it is better that way, because Balkans, according to an old definition, produced more history than they could afford.

Milosevic knew that.

Longtime Communist leader, he knew who he is dealing with, that is, the vast majority of Serbian citizens who were supporting his irresistible rise. But he also knew the West, because he lived several years in the U.S. Finally, he understood economics, or rather finance, because he came from the banking sector. These features added a total lack of scruples and the great poker player ability to bluff. Showing what is not, making others believe what they want to believe and continuing to play his game, always. It is amazing to see now how many people have believed his lies. His deadly poker game began and ended in Kosovo, and lasted exactly ten years.

It was June 28, 1989, just few months before the end of communism (someone said the "end of History"). Milosevic, Serbia's president since a little while, celebrated in front of a million enthusiastic people the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Polje, which took place six hundred years before. "Six centuries ago - said Milosevic - Serbia heroically defended itself in Kosovo Polje, but it also defended Europe. The lack of unity and the betrayal in Kosovo will keep following the people of Serbia as an evil destiny throughout the course of their history". Almost no one noticed the message of frenzied nationalism contained in the discourse, which was a masterpiece of ambiguity. Milosevic spoke at the same time as a communist and a liberal, a hawk and a dove, as a lay supporter of the former Yugoslavia and as a defender of Serbia's religious and ancestral tradition, although his evil conjuring would not hold up to serious criticism.

For Albanians of Kosovo, the bell tolled. The "traitors", even if it was not openly said, were Albanians, and all those who were conquered and converted to Islam by Ottoman Empire without a fight (such as Bosnian Muslims). According to Milosevic, Serbs, who six centuries earlier had to retire from the sacred sites of the Orthodox Church, continued to be the victims of History, in this case the victims of Albanians (soon to become also victims of Croatians, Bosnians, the whole world).

A blatant mystification, made possible by the almost total control of information and the blackout of many minds, starting from a plethora of intellectuals who, oddly enough, came in large part from the opposition to the communist regime.

The history of Albanians in Kosovo clearly showed that they were the real victims, people who had never been able to choose their own destiny. Subjugated for centuries but never entirely assimilated by Turks, they went to be part of Serbia at the time of the independence of Albania (1913), according to the will of European diplomacy.

Crushed by King Alexander in First Yugoslavia (see last report about Montenegro), purged with an iron fist by the troops of Titus, who chastised them for having been part of Great Albania created by the Nazis and the Fascists in the years of World War II, Albanians of Kosovo were second-class citizens of socialist "unity and brotherhood" Yugoslavia.

Their region, although they had important mineral resources, was the poorest and most neglected area of Yugoslavia. Serbs living in Kosovo sought better opportunities elsewhere, and this migration flow, combined with the lower birthrate compared to Albanian families, meant that from the end of the seventies Kosovar population was composed of 80 percent Albanians. Aware of this situation, Albanians had demanded a progressively greater autonomy, namely, the end of the creeping discrimination against them, with periodic rebellions. Among them there was a small extremist minority which dreamed of the re-unification with Albania. But the "Land of Eagles" was an isolated bunker from the rest of the world, relations between Enver Hoxha and Tito, both Communists, were bad, and the border between Kosovo and Albania was sealed as the Iron Curtain between East and West, insomuch as the differences between the two communities are very deep to this day.

Titus had partially accepted the demands of Albanian Kosovars in the new constitution of 1974, which according to many commentators emphasized the differences among the various republics in Yugoslavia. But the greater autonomy only meant in practice greater freedom of move for the local Communist leadership, as Albanian as Serb. The real crux of the matter, not only in Kosovo, was the relationship between the corrupt and authoritarian regime and the population, but the politicians agreed to transform it into the conflict with different ethnic groups, or even with different religious communities, where religion in the whole Yugoslavia does not have a deep meaning. Since the eighties, Serbs of Kosovo became, for the regime information, the "victims" of Albanian extremism, amplifying all the episodes that took place against them, and that often were not related to ethnic issues. It was the same in all Yugoslav republics. If there was a rape, for example, it was no longer the person X who raped the woman Y, but Albanian man (or Bosnian or Croatian) who raped Serb woman. The media make up was perfectly successful even when the episodes were pure invention.

The catastrophe was carefully prepared by various communist leaders, who wanted to escape from the imminent end of the regime, to exploit predatory capitalism that bully knocked on their doors, and to become "fathers of the fatherland" first, and then undisputed leaders of the war. The master of this gang of criminals was precisely Milosevic, who made the dress rehearsal in Kosovo.

No one would be allowed to touch a Serb, Slobodan thundered, acclaimed as the savior of a threatened people. Victims and victimizers exchanged roles, accusing each other. The world did not understand, or it pretended not to understand.

It would have been enough to know what happened in Kosovo, two years before the start of hostilities. Milosevic deleted any form of autonomy, dissolved the local parliament, resigned en masse non-Serb teachers, officers and employees, abolished the study of Albanian language.

The repression became very hard, with a high number of arrests, tortures, violence, murders. Against the brutal oppression of Serbian regime, there was not a popular leader, mirror of Milosevic to meet head-on, but a mild Albanian intellectual called Ibrahim Rugova. Born in 1944 in a village in Kosovo, Rugova had lost his father by Tito's partisans, but he was educated by his grandfather to have no resentment toward Serbs, victims of vicious violence themselves, not to say of an attempted

genocide, by Croatian Ustasha, allies of the Nazis. A graduate in Albanian literature at the University of Pristina, he specialized in social sciences in Paris under the guidance of Roland Barthes. Rugova was president of Albanian literary society, when he founded, in 1989, the Democratic League of Kosovo, defying openly the regime of Milosevic: he speaks boldly of independence for Kosovo, but without trace of nationalism. Rugova internalized the lesson of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, he calls Albanian people to the nonviolent civil resistance.

His popularity is huge, to the unofficial election of 1992, he was elected "president of Kosovo" (a symbolic position) with 90 percent of the vote.

Milosevic lets him do, because he knows that the international community does not care about Kosovo, and that European journalism moves only when the war itself starts, a show that is end in itself, as evidenced by the slow live martyrdom of Bosnia (see "Galatea", September 2002). Albanians continue to suffer in silence, they do not have the honor of the first pages even after the end of conflicts in former Yugoslavia (December 1995).

Murderers, war criminals, ideologues of "ethnic purity", act for the moment as statesmen, they are part of institutions, participate in the reconstruction. The first questioning the leadership emerged from the war, are just Serbs, or rather, Belgrade people, who take to the streets against Milosevic in the winter of 1996, as they did in 1991, but then they were a minority, now they begin to see the end of "Slobo".

During the same period, in Kosovo, small groups of self-defense are organized in country villages. In the spring of 1997, during the funeral of an Albanian family exterminated by Serbian special forces, for the first time armed and hooded young people are seen, they claim to be called "Kosovo Liberation Army" (UCK) and call Albanians for armed struggle.

The non-violent resistance did not achieve any results in eight years. None, at the international level, has really supported Rugova: these are times of Realpolitik. Indeed. Kosovar and Albanian mafias quickly leak in the rebel patriotism of UCK, they have greatly got rich with the black market of the war years, especially with the traffic of fuel for Serbia and Bosnia, isolated by international sanctions.

The collapse of Albanian state in the bankruptcy of the so-called "pyramids" offers a few months of total anarchy: entire arsenals are emptied, the paramilitary groups lay down the law, there are weapons for everyone, even for "cousins" of UCK. From the Kosovar diaspora, especially from the community gone to Switzerland, the money arrives, not always clean. For military training and coordination the CIA is available, because Clinton administration (and Madeleine Albright in particular) is tired of Milosevic's bluff and European ambiguities, it wants to close Balkan game in American way, ie using force. But international diplomacy needs ideal legitimacy, and Milosevic, with his campaign of increasingly unsustainable repression, hands them it on a plate. Maybe he had illusion on the consistency of Russian and Chinese support, and perhaps he thought to continue with Americans that poker was always successful with Europeans.

The fact is that CNN, closely followed by other major broadcasters, "discovers" Kosovo Albanians persecution, transforms it in genocide, when there was not even an attempt of ethnic cleansing, and it legitimates the patriotic UCK guerrillas, which is considered at first "terrorist" by Washington because of the old Communist inspiration of the movement.

The wheel is about to turn, a clearly unacceptable ultimatum is provided to Milosevic, whereas they already warm up the engines of NATO bombers. It is the spring of 1999: Milosevic does not surrender, and bombs begin to drop on Belgrade, Pristina, Novi Sad.

As a reaction, and in view of a military intervention from the ground that will never come, Milosevic decides to get rid once and for all of Albanians.

The real ethnic cleansing starts now, and the so much talked "humanitarian catastrophe" when there was not yet, becomes true and no one feels really involved. In essence, to save poor Kosovars there are poorer Albanian cousins: the international community supplies only "humanitarian" bombings, that add other innocent victims to innocent victims. A only goal is reached: after two months of heavy airstrikes, Milosevic agrees to withdraw troops from Kosovo, which is occupied by the forces

of NATO and Russia.

Now the situation is reversed: Serbs in Kosovo have no longer those who "protect" them, and the anger of Albanians is great. Rugova failed miserably: no one can understand how he could shake hands with Milosevic in the moment of maximum pain for Albanians and demand an end to the bombing. It is time for revenge: Serbs, considered en masse collaborators of the regime, are massacred in their turn, the Orthodox monasteries burned, the monuments of Serbian memory destroyed without mercy. Once again, the troops of the UN mission, which here is called UNMIK, give the impression of staying watching.

Thousands of Serbs flee. Exactly 159 thousand, according to the High Commissioner for Refugees in Pristina, to which we must add 13 thousand Montenegrins and 45 thousand Roma. In seven years, only one-tenth of refugees has returned, although the situation has been slowly improving, and in the last year there were no serious inter-ethnic violence.

"When I came back from Belgrade – says Jelena Trajkovic, young journalist of Radio B92 - I found my home in Pristina destroyed, and then I reached my family here in Gracanica. Serbs now live only in villages, in Pristina there is no one who I knew". Jelena does not expect that the situation may change in the future, and she is probably right: hard to believe that many more Serbs want to go back to Kosovo. The "survivors" are about 100 thousand (in a population of over two million people), almost all farmers, often elder, in short , people who would not know where to go, if they should leave their piece of land, their village.

"Unfortunately even today Kosovo Serbs allow to Belgrade to maneuver them as puppets - says Ismet Hajdari, Albanian journalist of AFP – they continue to think that only the government of Serbia can protect them, whereas it does not consider them at all, only caring about the land, the national pride of Serbia". That is exactly what you hear in Belgrade, at least by members of civil society. People need to get out of economic stagnation, especially in Kosovo, where half the population is unemployed. Of course, there is a fairly dynamism, the whole region is full of homes under construction, clubs are animated, there are a lot of (mostly second hand) Mercedes, but we know that, just as in neighboring Montenegro, the money running comes largely from trafficking, it does not create real development. But there is a positive atmosphere and a great desire to do, the Kosovar society does not seem depressed and it wants concrete answers about the problems of everyday life.

But the entire politics turns around false issues, how to defend Serbian sovereignty, which has no longer meaning: just think that also the currency is different (in Kosovo the euro already circulates), and even cell phones have completely different codes, so that calling abroad is easier than making a phone call between Belgrade and Pristina.

The talks, officially resumed in August, seems a dialogue of the deaf: Albanians want independence and want it now, Serbian side insists on talking about even very large autonomy, but always within the confines of the state.

The fact is that most of the political class called for solving the problem, was formed during the war, in one way or another, waving the banner of nationalism. Both Albanian as Serb leaders still have problems with international justice; someone has gone before the Hague Tribunal, others could be added. In Belgrade they would also have the ridiculous claim to process Albanians involved in war crimes, when they still can not take care of their own. Some Albanian leaders, former guerrillas as Thaci and Haradinaj are still ambiguous about the use of force as a way to achieve independence. The result is a total impasse.

But life goes on, day after day. The security issue is no longer the top priority, so that the international military contingent, KFOR, has decreased from 41 thousand men in 1999 to 17 thousand today. New Albanian police force, by all accounts, is working well, the dangers of conflict are more perceived than real, so much so that in the troubled town of Kosovska Mitrovica, the main place of the violence of 2004 and where the two communities are equivalent, there are no more military checkpoints to control access to the bridge that links the two parts. No one, however, thinks it is time for the UN troops to go away. And a few people believe that Kosovo's political leaders have developed a sufficient level of democracy. In short, the last hand of Kosovo poker, if Europe

wants to play it with more conviction than the United States (it would be really the moment), should be played fair, clearing the table starting from the demands of one of the players (Serbia). In other words, the discussion on Kosovo's independence should not minimally cover Belgrade's sovereignty over this territory, but it should move only on citizens' rights, and therefore the protection of Serbian minority. The timing for now undisputed independence should be that of the maturation of democratic institutions in Kosovo, monitored by the international community. With the unique perspective, for all Balkan peoples, to become soon European citizens.

**Cesare Sangalli**