

'Katastrofë'/'Katastrofa' in Kosovo/'Catastrophe' in America

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In early July, I spent a couple weeks in Prishtina, Kosovo. It was not my first time, nor will it be my last. I made the long journey primarily to attend a workshop sponsored by the Balkan Society for Theory and Practice, though near the top of my agenda were reconnecting with friends and colleagues, as well as continuing my investigation of evocative objects and ethnic enclaves.

Specifically, I was determined to locate and photograph The Church of St. Nicholas, the only functioning Serbian Orthodox church in the capital, and to walk the streets of Bosniak Mahalla, a multiethnic neighborhood in the Serb enclave of North Kosovska Mitrovica (or North Mitrovica).

Life as Tragedy

As expected, I participated in the workshop and pursued my research with camera in hand. Not only did I locate the church and the neighborhood, but I also found a great deal of crude painted graffiti, including anti-American images complete with scrawled swastikas. In those two weeks, however, I inadvertently became aware of some interesting use of language by my Albanian interlocutors. Whether sitting next to a taxi driver as he

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was hurling the two of us down the streets of Prishtina or meeting people on my daily quests for objects to photograph, I listened to their ramblings, and when needed, steered the conversation by asking questions about life in past and present Kosovo. This was me being the philosopher qua amateur cultural anthropologist. What was remarkable about these encounters was that a single Albanian word surfaced time and time again—'Katastrofë'. I found that the word was used to denote many things, including the 1990s war, Slobodan Milošević, Serbs and Serbia, the economy, the low wages, difficulty in traveling outside Kosovo, the quality of life, the condition of the streets, how people drove their vehicles, corruption, the quality of education and health care, and various Kosovar Albanian politicians, including President Hashim Thaçi and Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj, who recently resigned after being summoned for questioning by the Kosovo Specialist Prosecutor's Office in The Hague. (Do Kosovar Serbs have their own list of referents for the Serbian word 'Katastrofa'? And what about the other minority groups in Kosovo, like the Askhali,

Gorani and Romani?)

Whichever way I looked at this list, however, one thing became clear to me: life was, is, and will continue to be regarded by many in Kosovo as tragic, maybe even dystopian. Perhaps the following line from the poem "In a Coffee Pot" by the American novelist and poet Alfred Hayes captures their sentiments regarding life in Kosovo: "It's all the same there's nothing anywhere."

Granted, those who I talked with were taxi drivers, security guards, café workers, and the like, and not university professors, civil servants, and corporate managers. They are members of the low-wage working class who comprise a significant percentage of the population. It was within their ranks that I found 'Katastrofë' bantered about in the way that it was. Of course, their disenchantment was no surprise to me.

Again, the list of referents that I compiled from my conversation partners was extensive. Indeed, I wondered what sorts of things were not considered a calamity or a disaster, or who was not thought of as having engaged in appalling or ruinous behavior. Without any prodding, my partners were quick to answer: the United States ('Amerika'), Americans ('Amerikanët'), and President Clinton. Their respons-



es were more like highly choreographed scenes from a one act opera, each word well placed and uttered without much effort.

Also, I do not recall another group of people having shown as much admiration and respect towards the United States and Americans as the Kosovar Albanians, as evidenced by statues, street names, and an abundance of the stars and stripes during the Fourth of July. The American is portrayed more like the "heroic brother" than "l'étranger."

I took this glorification of all things American to be a bit disconcerting, if for no other reason that interventions often have unintended consequences, sometimes unexpected drawbacks and other times perverse results.

Yet the admiration and respect is somewhat understandable from the Albanian perspective given that the U.S.-led intervention of 1999 put an end to the ethnic cleansing and because of America's subsequent unwavering support for an independent Kosovo.

So by the time I boarded a plane outbound for Vienna, I had been given words that were thought to have no negative association with one another, two of them being 'Katastrofë' and 'Amerika'. The following is what I pieced together: "Yes, there is Katastrofë in Kosovo. Yes, Kosovo is Katastrofë.

But Amerika did not cause it. In fact, Amerika saved us!" The two words are, quite simply, watchwords expressing some core beliefs of many Kosovar Albanians.

However, I found the disassociation of these two words to be a bit "over the top" because "their" Amerika, which is "my" America, is thought by some Americans to be its own Catastrophe. Perhaps this has something to do with the Trump presidency and complaints about racism, divisiveness, corporate greed, militarism, stagnate wages, the failing educational and health care systems, corruption, and the dysfunctionality of the political system. I suspect, however, that there is more at work when it comes to the American Catastrophe.

Interesting enough, there are others who also associate America with Catastrophe. Some Kosovar Serbs make this association as well, but in their case it has everything to do with the tragedy of their people, Amerika being one of the referents of their Katastrofa.

The actions taken by the United States, from the 78 day bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 to its unwavering support of an independent Kosovo, are threaded into the Serb Katastrofa. It is the visceral presence of Amerika in their Katastrofa that forces them to reject the very existence of the fanciful Amerika that is so respected by many Albanians.

Where does this leave the Kosovar Albanians? They may well rethink the dis-

association of Amerika from Katastrofë, recognizing it for the illusion that it is, and arrive at the conclusion that there are no moral saints, Amerikane or otherwise.

If and when this rethinking occurs, it will come through the realization that the very intervention that rescued them from Serb oppression and ethnic cleansing has also made it very difficult for them to get along with their Serb "neighbors," those Serbs who just will not "go back" to Serbia.

Not only did the bombing campaign in Kosovo, Serbia, and Montenegro create a modern-day 1389 event in the hearts and minds of Kosovar Serbs—part of the visceralness of their Katastrofa, but it embolden the Albanians to believe that they now were on the verge of creating an independent Albanian Kosovo, one that did not need minorities, including the Serbs. In effect, the intervention by a fanciful Amerika contributed to the belief in a fanciful Kosovo. And this too became part of the Serb Katastrofa.

It did not take long for Kosovar Albanians to learn that the International Community (IC) would reject this phantasm because of its insistence on the creation of a multi-ethnic democracy that took human rights law seriously. Consequently, the creation of a multiethnic Kosovo, one that is both integrated/interactive and protective of its minorities, had to become a Kosovar Albanian project.

Unfortunately, the American intervention itself made this a difficult undertaking. Although the intervention brought about a negative peace—the eventual cessation of violence, it was less successful in tackling the knotty issue of a positive peace, which required reducing the conditions of conflict, including the divisiveness sustained by the ethnic enclaves. That was an unexpected consequence of the humanitarian intervention.

If the Kosovar Albanians are to make any headway in creating a viable and prosperous multiethnic democracy, they must acknowledge the convergence of Katastrofë and Katastrofa within the context of Amerika/Amerika. They must realize that the intervention was both a blessing and a curse.

Be grateful for the former and acknowledge the latter. Perhaps this will help to set them free to create a more livable, a more sustainable Kosovo for all its peoples—Albanians, Serbs, Ashkali, Gorani, Romani, Turks, and the rest.

The most difficult task is yet to come. The Kosovar Albanians and the others must be able to recognize or imagine that the people that each of them is harming or have had harmed by others on their behalf are people like themselves, not only as "they are in the stranger," but also as "the stranger is in them." Here as elsewhere, this transformation is something that Kosovars must accomplish on their own.

ABC Signs Deal with Air Serbia

The Airport Belgrade Catering, ABC, company, which was fully acquired by Emirati-owned Cirta Group, a group of companies supported by government entity Khalifa Fund for Enterprise Development, KFED, has secured the biggest deal with the country's flag carrier Air Serbia.

Under the terms of the agreement, ABC will provide the Serbian airline company, in which Etihad Airways has 49 per cent ownership stake, with catering services and logistics solutions for eight years. The deal is renewable for a total period of 15 years.

The agreement was signed by Abdulla Al Shammari, Chairman of the Cirta Group, and Duncan Naysmith, Chief Executive Officer of Air Serbia. Present during the signing were Ibrahim Al Darmaki, the UAE Embassy representative, who attended the event on behalf of UAE Ambassador to Serbia, Mubarak Saeed Ahmed Barasheed Al Dhaheri, and staff members from both parties.

Mouza Al Nasri, Acting Chief Executive Officer, KFED, said, "We are proud of the successive achievements of the KFED-supported projects and the historic accomplishment of Cirta Group and its subsidiary, ABC. We reiterate our continued commitment to providing the group and other Emirati-led projects with the necessary support in recognition of their critical role in the socioeconomic development of Abu Dhabi and the UAE."

Abdulla Al Shammari, Chairman, Cirta Group, revealed that the agreement covers the provision of in-flight catering and sale services, duty-free products, and various logistics solutions to more than 20,000 flights operated by Air Serbia.

ABC will deliver four basic services, which are the provision of in-flight meals and catering services, on-board sales, duty-free products, and several other logistics solutions. The agreement underwent rigorous processes to ensure that it met the industry requirements and complied with the existing regulations in the domestic airport and aviation sectors.

Established in 2006 in Abu Dhabi, Cirta Group is the one the prominent Emirati-owned companies in the fields of mechanical, electrical, and plumbing (MEP) services and facility management (FM).