

Written by Blackbird  
Tuesday, 29 April 2008 10:21

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Blackbird writes from Mitrovica Those who favored independence called a meeting in Pristina. Attendance was strong: a massive crowd filled the sports center, and the meeting was broadcast simultaneously on speakers for the throng of people in the square outside. The requisite opening remarks were given by a group of three leading politicians, who defined the question of the day as follows: How do we proceed with international acceptance of an independent Kosova? The floor was opened to the public. The first speaker was a slight middle-aged man in a tweed coat. He approached the microphone and cleared his throat. "It seems to me," he began...

"It seems to me that the optimal route to independence is by way of 'the path of least resistance.' We will only be truly free to determine our own future when we face no opposition to doing so. Therefore, our question should not be 'How to proceed with international acceptance of an independent Kosova,' but rather 'How to remove opposition to an independent Kosova.' When we look at the matter from the viewpoint of our opponents, the solution becomes clear. Opposition to independence exists because of Kosova's innate value. Opposition will vanish if we actively engage in the act of devaluation. In other words: no one will oppose the independence of Kosova if Kosova is made truly worthless.

"Currently, our leaders are engaged in the politics of value. They speak about the value of our history, property, human rights and the natural resources of our homeland. In doing so, they advertise the worth of what we have, and who then can blame our opponents for wanting it too? We must take the opposite approach. If we want to be unopposed in our ownership of Kosova, we must first make Kosova truly worthless. When no one else wants our homeland, only then will it be completely ours.

"How shall we begin in a mass devaluation of an independent Kosova? The first step is easy, and the required resources are readily available. Every citizen can contribute at no personal expense: we must make Kosova "unwantable." We must bury its mountains in garbage and cover its fields in waste. We must choke its streams with plastic bottles and soiled diapers. Its streets and alleyways should be paved in plastic bags and candy wrappers. Tires should be piled high in valleys and empty cigarette packs should be deposited in mountain streams. Our public spaces must be transformed into a stinking and retched eyesore: repugnant to all who see it. When the opponents of independence see that Kosova is nothing more than a polluted cesspool they will cease their opposition. "Who would want such a place?" they will say. "Let them have it!" they will say. The path of least resistance lies in the destruction of any existing value!"

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There was a hushed silence throughout the arena. For a time no one stirred. Finally, one of the politicians seated on the stage rose from his chair. He reached into his pocket and removed a pack of cigarettes. From the pack he withdrew the last remaining cigarette, which he placed in his lips and lit. He crushed the empty pack in his hands and threw it on the floor. A roar rose from the crowd and the devaluation of Kosovo began. Women emptied trashcans from their balconies into the streets below. Teenagers dumped the contents of their ashtrays from the windows of moving vehicles. Children threw ice cream wrappers on the ground in parks and playgrounds. Vetëvendosje members redoubled their efforts to cover Kosovo in graffiti. Kosovo quickly became filthy, but it was all part of a bigger plan. At the same time, a meeting was called in north Mitrovica. The requisite opening remarks were given by a group of three leading politicians, after which an old man rose from the crowd. "It seems to me," he said, "that our politicians have succeeded in convincing the entire world of the value of Kosovo and Metohija, but that this has not stopped the independence movement. There is only one method to achieve the cessation of international support: we must devalue the land itself so that no one cares any longer to support its independence. Only when Kosovo is judged the world over to be worthless will we be free to claim it. When no one else wants our homeland, only then will it be completely ours. The first step towards devaluation is easy, and the required resources are readily available..."

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This is not what happened. The truth is an entirely different story. The simple truth is that mother did everything. She cooked dinner and shopped in the market while her husband sat in the café with his friends. She sewed and washed the clothes, but most of all she cleaned the house. She scrubbed and dusted and rinsed and soaked. She hung the rugs outside and beat the dust from them. She filled the bucket with water and mopped the stairways. She scoured the floors of the living room and the sides of the bathtub. She worked for hours every day. I woke every morning to the sound of a vacuum cleaner or a wet mop hitting the floor outside our apartment door. The landlord's wife is cleaning today, and every day.

It was impossible to imagine cleaner homes than those of Kosovo. The importance of nations paled in comparison to the importance of clans, and the importance of clans paled in comparison to the four walls that housed ones family. The little girls watched and learned what would be expected of them, and little boys watched and learned what would not be expected of them. As soon as they set aside a toy it was stored away by their mother. As soon as a crumb fell from their plates she swept it up. I sat next to these growing boys on the park benches and watched them throw their empty soda cans into the grass. The entire park was lined in garbage. "Your mother does not work here," I thought.

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This is not the entire truth. The simplest truth of all is that there were no Kosovars, and so there was no one who cared about the public space of Kosovo. I met thousands of Albanians and hundreds of Serbs but, after a year in Kosovo, I had yet to meet anyone who might

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describe himself first and foremost as “Kosovar.” They were Serbs living in their hearts and Albanians living in their souls. The world was not crumbled slabs of pavement and plastic bags blowing in the wind. Albanians, whose language conjugated verbs in the present and future tense in an identical fashion, conjugated their existence in the same way: they looked out the windows of their spotless homes and saw a shining European future, and so they conjugate a similar existence in the present. On the other side of the river the Serbs pressed their faces against the windows of their spotless apartments and saw a shining past. The glowing promises of the past and future flashed against their windowpanes, obscuring the trash that covered the cities, streams and fields of today.

Only the small Roma boys seemed to see things clearly. They looked at me and accurately identified a naive American with coins in his pocket. Only the small Ashkali boys seemed ready to face the facts. They looked at the piles of trash and saw a stack of coins. They fished through the ditches for scraps of metal; they stacked the metal in their carts and moved down the road, looking neither to the future nor the past, but instead resolutely eyeing the next waiting pile of trash.