

Conflict, Intervention, Media: the West and the Balkans

with Boris Buden and Aferdita Kelmendi

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TRANSCRIPT**

AFERDITA KELMENDI

It's nice to be here [...]. So I am Aferdita Kelmendi and I am coming from Kosovo, from the place which is now known in to be in a postwar situation, where especially we journalists are facing big challenges, not for just stabilization of the situation there but also for bringing new kind of values which for many, many years were destroyed there. [...]

I'm going to tell you about the last ten years, from 1990 until 2000, and maybe express myself about all that happened there and where I was actually included in that history. I can say that there history was happening, that which we didn't solve in the past -- we were actually paying consequences of the past, which for many, many years and centuries, was actually conflict of areas and of wars. And finally we ended up again with another war, and I hope that one which happened in Kosovo is the last for Balkans.

Until 1990 I worked in RTV Pristina. That was a state radio television. I was working as an editor in educational and cultural programs and that was when we were ruled by Communistic party, but working in this program [we were] not so much watched by the party people because their attention was paid to more informative programs. So we were using possibilities sometimes [...] more to our audience, more than communistic party would allow us.

And then the war started in Slovenia, continued in Croatia and than and in Bosnia. And during this time in Kosova some kind of underground war was going on. In 1990 together with about 1300 colleagues I was expelled from the radio and TV station, when the

station was shut down for Albanians. This happened because we were expressing civil disobedience against the regime of Milosevic who in meantime pronounced us to be separatists and later on terrorists.

From the 1990s most of us were struggling for survival, to actually find a way to work something because more than 80 percent of population was dismissed from their workplaces. This was the case for my colleagues and myself as well as my husband, for we are colleagues too. He is a journalist also.

<http://www.bard.edu/hrp/images/kelmendi2.jpg>In meantime we started to work as foreign correspondents. Actually I was the first foreign correspondent in Kosovo. I started to work first of all for Radio France international and later for Voice of America. There I worked until 1998 when finally I establish Radio 21. That was always the dream, to come back to radio, actually to do radio, because we were radio journalists. But we were not allowed to do proper radio, actually to do radio on waves. So we started to learn more about global system of communication, and actually about the Internet. It was not easy, under the circumstances in Kosovo (where the Internet was also controlled by the regime of Milosevic), to do what we were doing. I remember that for many, many hours, for example, after we would record our program in real audio, we would sit and try to reach a telephone line to send this material to our web site.

Our web site is still going on, it's www.radio21.net We have a web site in Albanian and English, so in both of languages, they are transmitted and our aim is very soon to start up a program for twenty-four hours on this web site.

So this is how we were going through this time, not telling you that through this years we also passed many challenges -- we were struggling to survive not only to work. I am not going to forget, for example, how the last year, the last two years we were working until midnight, one o'clock, and then when we had to go home through empty streets, where police and paramilitary forces were, we acted as Serbs going home. Because nobody from Albania would walk through the streets at that hour.

During these years I learned also something else. During 1990s I thought that Kosovo was such a small place -- that the Balkans is small and the world is so big. But these last years, when we started to work through Internet, through new technology for us, I understood that the world is small actually. Because you can reach people all over the world in a minute. You can send a message, you can receive a message, tell a story, find out what is happening outside of the country. [Even when in other press that] is actually very much controlled.

But also we could communicate with people inside of Kosovo and in Serbia to do something more for, that, what our aim always was -- establishing civil society and bringing democratic values to these countries. It was not so easy and it seems we were not so successful, because we didn't succeed in stopping the war. But this did not keep us from continue our struggle to bring tolerance to these countries, understanding and probably, one day -- even now it's too early to say this -- but one day also reconciliation.

Today Kosovo is suffering its trauma, post war trauma. There many people who have lost their loved ones. There are many mass graves. During this spring these mass graves will start to be opened again. There are many missing people -- about 7000 of them. There are also more than 2000 in Serbian prisons. Yesterday just in front of the justice court came 140 young people who were taken just from one city, Jakova, who were charged as terrorists. Actually during the war they were taken from the city, during the NATO bombing and sent in prisons in Serbia as hostages. That is our explanation. What to say more about this painful part? I am not going to talk about, because I am not here actually to talk about that.

But maybe I should say more about the fact that Kosovo today is trying to get out, actually from its trauma, to heal the pains. And in the meantime to build up, together with the international communities which are there, to build up a new way of thinking, a new society, which is not so easily done. But there is big hope and people believe in it.

In the meantime I would say that it's very important for us as Kosovars, that Serbia will get away from that regime which is in Serbia still. And that finally Serbs will start to work on the development of their society, because one thing is very important in the Balkans: You have to have good neighbors to live with them together, to share all that we have in these countries.

In my project today Radio21 is on the air 24 hours. During the war we were working from exile. Our radio station was looted by police on the 29th of April and most of my colleagues and myself with my family, we were deported to Macedonia. Thank God that this deportation happened by paramilitary forces, not by the police. Because the police wanted us, but in meantime, these paramilitary forces didn't recognize us.

So we [...] were expelled from Kosovo. For more than seven months we sent our Internet signal toward Holland and in Holland our colleagues had access to a big provider. They were downloading our real audio files in short wave transmitters of 2 or 3 seconds delay, than we were on the waves all over the world. Every night we had a two-hour program, and in this way we could reach Kosovo with information, but also bring information to all our people who were outside of Kosovo, about what was happening in the countries where all these people were displaced from Kosovo. And also about what was happening inside Kosovo, because we established links with satellite phones inside, with our colleagues, who were still there.

After 4 months, we returned. Now we are on the air 24 hours [a day]. We are broadcasting, and our program is a public radio station. Even we are not intergovernmental -- we are private. We are not NGO, because it is still not clear in Kosovo whether it is best to be an NGO, private or intergovernmental. We are still struggling with things which are not so well known for us and in the future we have to decide what our status will be. But in meantime we are acting as a public service, because of the need of the population there.

As a radio station, you can say that when we established this radio station, we had ideals and our ideal was civil society in Kosovo. So

this radio station still has a mission and this mission probably won't end in the coming years because probably we are going to struggle with problems, if not with ethnic problems than with economic problems in our society. Because it's not so easy, from a country which passed through war to immediately establish everything there.

<http://www.bard.edu/hrp/images/kelmendi4.jpg> So we are going to need time but we believe that we'll achieve our aims. And the belief is for me sustainable because 60% of our population is younger than 18 years old, which means that the young generation is coming. They will be the ones who will go on with the developing of our society. And they are more open-minded. They didn't pass through Communism. There are people, young people, who have a lot of knowledge about the Internet, a lot of knowledge about the world. During these last years these young people grew up in front of such programs, actually, in front of international programs, because it was the only way to communicate with western countries, to learn something.

Most of our young people speak English and some of them speak German, not lot of them Serbian because during the last years we were living in parallel life, so we are probably going to need to establish the links which were destroyed during these years.

I am open for questions, if you have something to ask me and so we can continue to discuss.

Let me first just tell this - we also did TV production and are still doing TV production. Before the war we were doing a serial of TV documentary features with the title: "Kosovo: View from Inside". These documentary features were shown, first of all, in 15 independent TV stations in Serbia. This was the first time the Serbian population actually had opportunity to see Albanians outside of Serbian state propaganda, because Albanians were always treated in radio and TV station as people who supported separatism, who were nationalists, who were terrorists. And these documentary stories actually bring ordinary Albanians to TV, in front of the Serbian public. And the reactions in Serbia, in 1998, was very big. Most of the newspapers there wrote stories about

these documentary features [talking about] decreasing tension with TV production. Because that was our aim actually, to decrease the tensions in Serbia and to show to the people there that Albanians are people who want normal life, who want to live, who have the same desires, who have the same needs and same concerns as Serbian people.

But we were not allowed to actually continue our TV production because of what happened after that. Some of these stories were shown on World Report, on CNN, because we were also affiliated with World Report, so we were sending our stories there. One of the stories which you will watch is one that Thomas recorded from CNN in April of last year. Thank you.

(Video footage played)

BORIS BUDEN

As you have heard, I came from, actually from Austria, Vienna, not from Croatia, but I have been working on the project of alternative media or project of alternative medias -- because it's not only a magazine, but more than one magazine -- for about 8 years. It is enough time to reflect critically upon this experience, this journalist experience, this experience of alternative political activism.

This experience for me is some kind of a problem. Because what I am going to present you is a kind of combination of theoretical pessimism and practical optimism. [On the one hand] I don't believe in the mission of alternative media within a closed political situation, as for instance, nationalism -- not only nationalism in Croatia or in the Balkans, but also in Austria. On the other side I do the job, I have done the job: I have been working, being active all the time, so there's a kind of practical optimism. This could be described as somehow schizophrenic, but this is the fact and I think we should confront the problem and I am going to talk about it.

<http://www.bard.edu/hrp/images/buden2.jpg> The starting point for me is a political evaluation of what happened in Kosovo last year with the

intervention of NATO. A year ago, I tried to speculate about the true political objective of this intervention and I could find nothing but the idea of Kosovo as alternative province within Serbia, within Yugoslavia, something that Albanians already had under the so called Tito constitution in 1974. It is the only political objective of the NATO intervention, to give them back what Milosevic took away from them at 1989. I found this political objective a kind of scandal, because we could see at that time that nineteen of the most developed countries, democratic countries of the world were bombing the post-communist one to reestablish, to reinstate a communism, a form of communism, a status quo ante.

Namely, we could say NATO was Titoistic and Yugonostalgic and communist-nostalgic. And I found it a very, very big problem to understand what the true objective of this intervention was. Only a few months ago Bernard Kouchner, the governor of Kosovo, said in an interview for the German *Der Spiegel*, that an autonomous of Kosovo, the same as the one under Tito, is the political model the West has been striving for.

So what we have politically is nothing. It's a political deadlock, a complete a deadlock. I think I can call it a deceit. We have on the one side, military victory, but politically it is completely a defeat, because there is no idea how to solve the political problem of Kosovo. Should Kosovo stay within the former Yugoslavia or be separated -- but how? Then there is the new framework of bigger Albanian state. Well, this political problem is still open and there are no ideas about solving it. How do you decide if the military intervention of war ends with a victory or defeat? It is only a question of its political goals, political objectives, if they have been reached or not. Since war is nothing than the continuation of politics by other means (as was the definition by the Prussian general Clausewitz) -- and I think this definition still has something to tell us about the war and about the nature, identity, of war, logical war.

The political defeat of the West in the Balkans, this is for me today, something I describe as a scandal. And this scandal is something which completely disappeared from the public, [from the] European, western public. Nobody tries to ask about the

question, the problem. It has been completely disappeared in the so-called media coverage of the Balkan problem. Our concentration on the media issue -- we hope somehow to understand, to get some information and to reflect upon politics, through questioning the media. I think that our concentration and fascination on the media is also a part of the problem.

I don't believe that we have a media concept, which could have political effects in what we expected, we have been expecting, from the so-called alternative media. I am going to give you an example, in Serbia -- you know, Serbia is the [?] of Europe, and there is an idea about Serbia as a poor country, where there is no freedom: poor masses, totalitarian regime of Milosevic, and a few alternative media activists [who] tried to give alternative information, but they are suppressed and it does not work. Well, this picture is completely wrong and I'll give you an example. I'll quote from a report on the media situation in Serbia, published in the spring of 1999, a year ago, at the time of the intervention. And this report describes the situation in Serbia, describes the situation of the so-called alternative media in Serbia. I quote:

"In the federal republic of Yugoslavia there are half a dozen independent dailies, several weeklies, three independent news agencies, more than 14 independent local newspapers and journals, more than 15 independent radio and television stations, which cover about the 70% of the country's territory; 2 associations of independent journalists and an independent international press center."

This, by far outnumbers independent media institutions in many western democracies. Austrians could only dream about such media freedom, about such a large scene of alternative media. They have only two state-controlled TV programs and they have almost only one weekly, but it's not independent. It's somehow independent, but you cannot compare it with the Serbian situation. And again we shouldn't forget Serbia is constitutionally a pluralist, parliamentary republic. And the present regime would have won the elections even without having cheated. This country, a land of highly developed media freedom, was at the same time perceived as the worst of all European countries as a symbol of political

backwardness, of total absence of law and order, of dictatorship, nationalist hatred, suppression of all kinds of democratic freedom, severest violations of human rights etc, etc. -- shortly, as the last best bastion of totalitarianism in Europe. Well, something went wrong here, we have a beautiful media situation and a complete political defeat. The author of the report was also proud to note some important progress. He states that at the beginning of the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina the state run media had the upper hand and great influence. Nationalist hysteria was easily created, but now, shortly before the bombing, he concludes:

"The crisis in Kosovo turned violent in the February 1998, however the professional attitude of the much stronger independent media averted the reappearance of the similar extremes."

How are we to understand this naiveté, this blindness towards the reality, because at that time he thinks that crisis in Kosovo cannot reappear, because we have strong media and they wouldn't allow something [like that]? How to understand it? Certainly not as a consequence of a lack of objective information, of not having enough of the free, independent media. It is rather the way the author of the report sees the reality. His belief that this is the role of media in the development of democracy is what makes him blind towards the reality. He believes in the mission of alternative media, so he can never see that it doesn't function.

The reality is what the ideology of ultimate victory, democracy over communism, produces as reality and not what the independent media reports about this reality, even if they report "alternative information." Therefore, instead of providing an analysis of the concrete political situation he quotes the dogma, efforts to democratize the central and eastern European the last decade, [...] to see change in all post-communist societies. The legacies of the past have painstakingly been eroded by the appearance of a modern democratic culture that has hinged on the simultaneous transformations of the political, economic and social spheres. Key to all these changes has been the free flow of information. Independent media has in so many different ways been the crucial ingredient of greater freedom and more responsible citizenry. Even if this is counterfactual, as it is, in his belief, independent media

can prevent the escalation, [prevent] the Kosovo crisis from becoming an open war. He sticks to this belief because there is no democratic alternative to it. For the nationalist reality cannot be an alternative out there, for the modern European democrat, with whom he identifies. Why therefore wait for the alternative information from the independent alternative media if there is no political alternative, if the outcome of the political struggle has already been decided?

The ultimate victory of the actually existing Western democracy is the matter of necessity and not a matter of practical political engagement or historical contingency. For the one who believes in it this is obvious as much as the ultimate victory of communism over capitalism was something obvious for the communists. Of course, there is no ideology, which completely covers the whole adipose of social life and political reality. A moment of sobering doubt finds also place in his report. I quote:

"While the strength of the political opposition in Serbia has ebbed and flowed, the independent media progressively gained in strength with some of them becoming most influential independent voices, not only in the country, but in the region as a whole. The media with the most success went on to find itself in the awkward position of being seen as a replacement of the political opposition."

Here, we find explicitly the media in the role of being a [?] supplement for political action. Therefore, the so-called alternative media doesn't provide alternative information, for there is no alternative to be reported. The role is to represent precisely the lack of the alternative to the existing status quo. What the excessive presence of the alternative media actually conceals is the absence of the political alternative. They face alternative media as society, which has already, has become completely transparent and which should be imagined as a kind of aquarium. There is no social secret to be discovered any more, there are no obscure power relations to be revealed. Big fishes eat the small ones and there is no media to make news out of it. It's only the UN-humanitarian gaze which finds some interesting contempt in this completely naturalized social situation. It sees political issues such as war only as a kind of national catastrophe, which result in productions of victims.

This is what we have as so-called media coverage, not only of the Kosovo war, but of the whole Yugoslav catastrophe from the very beginning of the war in Croatia till now. It sees political issues as such only as a kind of national catastrophe, therefore the fact of this media coverage can be only identification with these victims, but never solidarity with people involved in a political struggle, which can be either lost or won. And all you can remember, which was Albanian's pictures of Muslims -- always we had these poor people, victims of war, but we never realized that these people were at that moment fighting for something, losing or winning on their way to reach some political goals. And if there is no political solidarity, we cannot speak about solidarity at all, because humanitarian solidarity has its function, it is something which has depoliticized, the whole scene, so that we don't see the political issues, not at all.

This situation has some connections with the contemporary situation in Austria. You know what happened in Austria about 5 or 6 months ago, with the election of Jörg Haider's party [...], and month and a half ago they were included into the new Austrian government. I think you remember [that] the European, and not only European, public got upset with the results of not only the elections, but the fact that there is the first time after the second World War a politician who has explicitly stressed his very problematic, very racist political background, [who] takes part politically in a government to be considered as a normal European democratic government within the European Union. Austria an example of political stability and economic prosperity, and social harmony has suddenly become a problem. A country in the democratic system with an unresolved Nazi past of nationalism, racism, populism. It has been even recently discovered that more than 40% of Austrians have some kind of racist feelings.

Well, one could say that this situation reminds us of the situation on the Balkans, but this similarity is not my point. I am actually suggesting that these similarities between Europe and the Balkans lie within the very ideological mechanism which produces political and historical or cultural identity in today's Europe.

How does this mechanism work? Are there some political problems, which are potentially very dangerous, this is to say, which evoke such contradictions and cultural identity or antagonism, which place into question ideological edifice, the whole ideological system of contemporary Europe? Then when we have the situation of facing these problems, these political problems, we, Europe, project our own excluded [to the] outside as a cultural problem. A political problem to the exclusion becomes a cultural one.

What's the problem with Jörg Haider in Austria? My thesis is that Jörg Haider is a European and not Austrian political phenomena. He is a typical answer to the typically European problem, the problem of immigrants. Today's Europe is not capable of solving it in accordance with the very principles, the universal, humanistic and democratic values upon which this Europe has been founded. Instead of facing this political challenge directly with all possible consequences, the European political mind projects it into a peculiar Austrian political, cultural and historical identity. They say that, for instance, Nazism is a part of Austrian cultural identity. Those people in Austria have never got rid of their Nazi past, for instance. It means that one problem, very open political problem of contemporary Europe has been projected into the past, in the unresolved past of special cultural identity, national ethnical identity of the Austrians.

The same has happened to the political challenge of the Yugoslav war, or the chain of Yugoslav wars. They have never been recognized as a European political problem, but rather as a destiny typical for the Balkans. 'You know why there is war there, why they fight -- because they have been fighting each other for centuries. It belongs to their cultural identity. So if there is some problem they pull out guns.' And it is how it is in the Balkans, but not within the Europe. With the political victory of Jörg Haider we haven't got the Balkans in Austria, as Europeans think today -- comparing Austrians with Serbs, and the reaction of Austrians: "But we are not Serbs. They are the in Balkans, we are not in the Balkans, we are not Serbs."

They are Serbs in fact, but not in their particular cultural identity.

This is European politics, which makes them Serbs, being Serbs because they, as a scene which represents a political problem, exclude this problem and project it onto contemporary Europe. It is very interesting, the reaction of Austrian so-called liberals to this political challenge. They identified themselves with the reaction of Europe and they also have their political project. This political project, very simple and which could remind us on the project of European Union, the West in solving the Balkan problems. They say, "what we need in Austria is strong and developed civil society and what we need again is the alternative media."

We see the same approach as the approach of the democratic West to the Balkans. And what has happened in the last ten years in the Balkans, we saw, instead of military intervention, how enormous amounts of money has been invested in the development of free and independent media, in building the so-called civil society, but we have never seen the result of it. And if it doesn't work, well, then the West bombs.

These are two extremist parts of the phenomenon I call depoliticization of the whole situation. Either the so-called humanistic approach, the idea of, "well, let's improve the culture, let's educate them. They have already free and independent media, they have democratic institutions, but instead of voting for democrat, they vote for Milosevic. So should be more educated, more enlightened and so on and so on." We need another 10 years, and another ten years and meantime we see, we saw, we have seen hundred thousands of dead people. And if it doesn't work, well, then military intervention without the idea of political solution. And maybe I could end this in an essay written a month ago in German by a left liberal intellectual on the situation. In the end of his essay he suggested: first a strong civil society independent media and if this doesn't work then blue helmets into the Berntal. Berntal is the valley, where Hider, York Hider in Corintia comes force. So, the same pattern: first the strong media, civil society, and if it doesn't work -- and it would not work -- then intervention. Well this is maybe could be the starting point for further discussion. Thank you.

QUESTIONS

I wonder, if you could say a word or two about the [independent media survey] because just the fact that there are so and so number of TV stations, so and so number of radio stations, the technological infrastructure by itself, doesn't necessarily make for an independent media.

BUDEN

Well, today it's much worse than the situation was then. Now I think we have the biggest crisis of media. But the situation at that time was the situation of which I spoke. It wasn't only the Serbian situation, but also the Croatian situation. If you ask about [the message] I will tell you the [alternative media] is so-called "democratic mainstream." Their message is democracy is better than totalitarianism. [...] Most of them, they are not openly nationalist. Today, [nationalism] is part of the society -- nationalism is not something top-down, it is phenomenon of bottom-up. And this "mainstream" of society has been weak.

What does this mean? When I talk about alternative information, people in Croatia know all about their war criminals. They know who has killed, how and where, I think. That doesn't mean that they push the public towards the idea of "send the criminals to the Hague to prosecute them." This is how it doesn't work. Information - this very old idea from 1970s, you know, that we should, alternative media should provide alternative information. This information should change the consciousness and this consciousness should have [?] in the end. People should change the reality. This change doesn't function. That is the problem.

KELMENDI

Maybe I will add something. [...]. The problem I see of this so-called independent media comes, as he mentioned, also from nationalists. But they use this independent media as a struggle to (?) change, negotiate, to come into different positions. Of course, the leaders of independent media were involved directly in political life, struggling for political position. And this I see as the problem of independent media, when some journalists or leaders of the media have political influence. And this is why the independent media didn't succeed. This is true in Croatia, but is the same in

Serbia also.

[...] Maybe it's not good to say independent media, maybe it's better to say professional media, because when we say professional media, we understand that there are (?) professional journalists, whose aim is to work according to international standards. So I don't much like the terminology "independent media." Independent from whom, independent for whom. I will generally speak [as a journalist] and then everybody knows that I am a journalist who is professional and in this way you can achieve something.

Actually achieve what? What is the struggle of professional media in society? I said what our struggle was and I mentioned also the ideal -- ideal because for many, many years we were living under oppression. We were suppressed, and when we were suppressed we were dependent on part of the society who (?). In Kosovo, [...] we were actually living, acting in parallel. So that was another kind of life, and we were not only using the tools to send messages but also to send messages to both sides, outside and also inside Kosovo, with one aim: to prevent the war.

[END OF TAPE]