

Journey among the monks of Visoki Decani Monastery, in a land tormented by war and ethnic conflicts, and on the threshold of international political recognition that may radically alter its destiny. It's a land where the task of the 1,600 Italian soldiers stationed there is not limited to guaranteeing the truce among the factions. They also do civil service, a fact the local people appreciate.

## Kosovo: toward Independence Day

BALKANS 2

by Matteo Tacconi



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**S**o many little soldiers, all alike. Ponytail, black tunic, long bushy beards, with short cut-off cylinders covering their heads, the thirty monks of the Visoki Decani Monastery, in western Kosovo, are always ready to throw open their doors to visitors, be they pilgrims, journalists or simple curiosity seekers.

Catholics would say that the Visokians take their inspiration from Benedictine principles: ora et labora, prayer and work. As we enter the monastery on an early morning the little soldiers are already in action. Two of them are supervising the restoration of the walls of

their residence. A few yards away, centered in an orderly English meadow, rises the elegant profile of the Chapel of the Ascension, a Unesco world cultural heritage site since 2004. Crossing the threshold of the sacred building, our eyes fasten on the precious frescos and Byzantine mosaics that glow on its walls. "It is the most important art gallery in the Balkans", explains our guide, Father Ilarion. Rastko Lupulović (his baptismal name) had been a rock-and-roller, life of the party of the Belgrade underground and member of the Kanda, *Kodza i Nebojsa Band*, when, smitten by faith in 1996, he sought admission to



Filip de Smet (2)

Decani. From that time the monastery, a tiny Serbian enclave in the heart of a territory almost exclusively inhabited by Albanians, has become his home.

A wall covered with portraits of saints, patriarchs and bishops separates the monastery's Spartan kitchen, where some of the little soldiers are busy at the burners, from the dining hall. The pope are jacks of all trades. They create religious icons and produce candles, cultivate vegetables and make wine and rakija (the local moonshine). They sell these goods to pilgrims, to the Serbs of the enclaves or even beyond the border, in nearby Montenegro. This hard-working, self-governing community principally finances itself by commerce. Albanians also occasionally purchase the monastery's products, but only as an exception to the rule: in Kosovo, Serb commercial goods are boycotted by habit and principle. And the opposite is also true, as confirmed by Kosovo export figures to Serbia: just about zero. Visokians excel in the work of their hands, but are also savvy cybernauts. They were the first to purchase the domain [www.kosovo.net](http://www.kosovo.net). The mind behind this sort of Google cache of the history of the Orthodox Diocese of Kosovo, available both in Serbian and in English, is the eclectic prior of the monastery, Father Sava. It

is a centuries old story that the pope fear is threatened with oblivion. The fear is that the Albanians intend to erase all traces of the Serbian presence in Kosovo. To illustrate, Father Ilarion reminds us of the events of March 17, 2004. On that day a series of anti-Serbian pogroms in the largest cities of the province cost a dozen Serbs their lives. Over 700 homes were destroyed and 36 religious buildings were vandalized or burned down. The Nato contingent (Kfor) was unable to prevent the violence which – in the opinion of many – was well planned and coordinated. The monks' worries continue to mount on the vigil of Kosovo's independence. There is no longer any doubt that Pristina, assisted by Washington and Brussels, will soon enjoy full sovereignty. After long drawn-out and fruitless negotiations, the big bang is just around the corner. The Albanians will get their "promised land", and definitively burn their bridges with Serbia, which is still formally considered to rule the province, though it has been administered by the U.N. since the conflict in 1998-1999. There is little doubt that this further amputation of territory, on the heels of the Montenegro independence referendum of May 2006, will leave Belgrade reeling from the shock. In the case of Kosovo, the blow inflicted also



\_The Italian task force in Pec is made up of about 1,600 soldiers who guarantee the territory's safety. Its tasks also include protecting the Visoki monastery and the monks

has a cultural sting. "Our presence here is centuries old", Father Ilarion cuts short. Seven centuries, to be exact. The monastery was built between 1327 and 1335 by King Stephen III Nemanja, whose remains are preserved in the Chapel of the Ascension. Stephen III was the predecessor of Zar Dušan, the ruler who extended the boundaries of the medieval Serbian State to Greece and Bulgaria. Serbia became conscious of itself as a nation under the Nemanja, thanks also to the close linkage of spiritual and temporal powers. San Sava, brother of Stephen I, was successful in obtaining autonomy for the Serbian church from the patriarch of Constantinople. This brought self-governance for church institutions. The year was 1219. With their remarkable capacity to facilitate consensus through religion, the Nemanjas began to establish Kosovo, until then a territorial outback, into a bastion of religious culture, dotting it with monasteries – Decani, Ravanica and Gracanica are the best known – for the veneration of the relics of their

sovereign saints. The patriarchal complex of Peç because the seat of the patriarchate. To this day, in this western Kosovo city the metropolitan of Belgrade and Serb Patriarch presides on the occasion of symbolic functions. This further underscores the fact that Kosovo, though it has an Albanian majority and is administered by the U.N., is still considered the cradle of Serbian civilization, a thesis upheld not only by the Church, but by the Belgrade government as well, in opposition, be it clear, to the independence of Pristina.

Italia village, general quarters of the Italian Kfor contingent and part of the Western task force, is located at the gates of Peç. It is one of five commands – under Italian guidance, the other contingents are Spanish, Rumanian, Slovakian and Hungarian – making up the Nato mission in Kosovo. Permanently snow-capped mountain peaks separating Kosovo from Albania and Montenegro shelter the small city and its jeep driving, camouflage clad denizens. Currently, the Italian mission at Peç consists of approximately 1,600 troops under the command of the Aosta Brigade's Nicolò Falsasperna, and it is committed to guaranteeing safety in the territory. One of their assigned tasks is the protection of the monks of Visoki.

But the contingent offers more than its simple military nature warrants. Major Angelo Vesto, spokesperson for the mission, gives us a breakdown of the many initiatives touching on civilian life undertaken by the Italian soldiers. "The various projects mostly concern improvements to the infrastructure and initiatives in public education. For example, we built a multiethnic nursery school and a center for people with disabilities, and we rebuilt the boarding school at the university of Djakova (a city south of Peç)". One of the feathers in the cap of the Italian mission is Radio West, Kosovo's first multiethnic broadcasters, transmitting in Serbian and in Albanian. "The program schedule now includes a tri-lingual Daily Program – Italian, Serbian and Albanian – discussing a single theme illustrated by a narrative of the three respective ethnic variants and customs treated from a multiethnic perspective".

Multiethnicity. This is a word without a referent in this little niche in Kosovo. As we have said, you can count the Serbs on the tips of your fingers. Their exodus is blamed on the



retaliations and violence instigated by Ramush Haradinaj, ex commander in loco of the Kosovo liberation army (Uck) and leader of a fine-tooth-comb counter campaign of ethnic cleansing. It is this he stands accused of before the International Court of Justice at the Hague for ex-Yugoslavia, where his trial began in March of 2006.

But the pope of Decani have continued to make their stand under Italian military protection which has guaranteed their security since 1999, the year of Kosovo's entry into Nato. It is not the first time that Visoki's history crosses paths with Italy in uniform. During the Second World War, the chauvinists of Balli Kombëtar, an Albanian paramilitary group, attempted to destroy Visoki Deāani. With Rome in control of the Peç Region, Italian military police [the Carabinieri] intervened to prevent it. The signatures and dedications of the royal Carabinieri can still be read in the old visitors registers. Some praised the natural goodness of the mineral water offered to them by the pope. It's a good bet that the members of the force also appreciated the rakija. But no one put this in black and white. They were on duty.

#### Solioz: idealist or realist?

"Kosovo's will be a one-of-a-kind, somewhat virtual independence. Kosovo Albanians know they cannot go it alone, without the economic and political support of Washington and the European Union. But Kosovo's sovereignty also faces another obstacle of 'dependence'. The point is that Pristina has no resources and cannot do without good neighborly relations with its boundary States with respect to energy and trade. The EU will have to play the role of guarantor of those relations, thus mending the wrongheaded policy whose consequences for the Balkans have isolated individual problems from the general context of the ex Yugoslavia". All this according to Christophe Solioz, one of the most respected European experts on the Balkans, and general secretary of the Geneva based Center for European Integration Strategies.

**Hashim Thaci, Kosovo's new prime minister, continues his daily threat of the "break", by which he means the unilateral declaration of independence. Is it just propaganda?**

Kosovo's politicians argue both ways. On the one hand they appeal to public opinion and to the immigrant community, particularly well rooted in Germany and Switzerland, thus playing the nationalist card. On the



Filip de Smet (2)

other – and here they give proof of maturity – they are pragmatic and are working toward making the transition from an independence oriented toward the United Nations to one which looks to Europe, which will inherit the supervision of the province, as free from trauma as possible. One of the reasons for this is that without the green light from the international community Kosovo will never be independent.

**What traumas? There is talk of possible violence, and of a Serb embargo. Is this what lies ahead for Kosovo?**

No, not if an advanced regional solution can be proposed. There has been talk of a “Kosovo region of Europe”: a worthwhile idea that would relax tensions and guarantee prosperity. Even the Americans, the most steadfast proponents of independence for Pristina, took the idea of a similar formula in consideration some months ago. But Russia, which is hostile to any hypothesis that separates Kosovo from Belgrade, put a stop to the process. It is important, however, to persevere in these attempts and – may I add – further involve Russia in a wider pan-European approach. Unfortunately, Moscow has been kept at a distance in the past, except for the final, non-conclusive stage of the negotiations held by the trojka (the trio USA-EU-Russia). The principal

risk today is that the reasons of the Kosovo Albanians will be given excessive weight over those of the Serbs.

**Is Belgrade still paying for the crimes of Milosevic?**

If Belgrade had made the far-sighted proposals it is making today in the early '90s, it would have favored a consensus solution with respect to Kosovo and also avoided Nato intervention, which has made matters worse by creating enormous problems for Pristina as well as for Belgrade, both of which find themselves on dead-end streets. It is of utmost importance now to bring the UN protectorate phase, by now useless and inefficient, to an end, and consider further that Serbia cannot change its identity for the hundredth time: Yugoslavia, the Union of Serbia and Montenegro, Serbia, and Serbia minus Kosovo tomorrow. The fact is that Belgrade has taken great strides at the administrative and bureaucratic level and in the matter of reforms. The EU must demonstrate more courage, but also greater imagination in solving the puzzle of Kosovo and in seeking to do it in a broader context. What is lacking, unfortunately, is a farseeing political vision that can examine the problem in depth, and that can convince not only the states, but the people themselves, in believing in something. Otherwise, who will care for Kosovo?