

## **TURKS OF KOSOVO: WHAT TO EXPECT?\***

**ŞULE KUT**

Dr. Şule Kut is Associate Professor of International Relations at Istanbul Bilgi University.

\* This article is partly based on the author's paper, 'Between Ethnic and Civic Identity: Turks of Macedonia and Kosovo', presented at the 5th Annual Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN) in New York City, 14 April 2000.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The ethnic Turks in the post-communist Balkans were faced with one of two diametrically opposed experiences in the 1990s. They were either caught between the nationalism of the majority and that of the major minority, as in Kosovo and Macedonia, or they were relieved of ethnic tension and benefited from the overall democratisation of the country as in Bulgaria and Romania. In both situations, however, they were able to form ethnic parties and participate in political processes. In the meantime, again in both cases, especially due to Turkey's position in the region as a major power, more often than not they have gained confidence as citizens of their respective states. In this new environment, while some Turks have become more aware of their ethnic identity in a political context where ethnic identity has become particularly fashionable, others in the same countries moved away from their previous stress on ethnicity. In any case, it is striking that when most nationalities became nationalist, the Turks, by and large, remained remarkably distant from ethnic and, especially, separatist nationalism. The Turks of the Balkans not only did not turn separatists, but they also openly resented others' separatist calls. In general, they have been strongly in favour of the territorial integrity of their new states in former Yugoslavia or elsewhere in the Balkans during the turbulent 1990s.

In case of former Yugoslavia, Turks have long been squeezed not only between the conflicting majority nationalism (Macedonian in Macedonia and Albanian in Kosovo) and the larger minority nationalism (Albanian in Macedonia and Serbian in Kosovo), but also between their own ethnic, religious and civic identities. Hence, the break-up of Yugoslavia significantly affected former Yugoslav citizens of Turkish nationality as they entered a new process of qualitative and quantitative marginalisation in the newly independent Republic of Macedonia and in Kosovo.

Despite the periodic immigrations to Turkey since the nineteenth century and assimilation by larger Muslim minorities, particularly Albanian, Turks have traditionally constituted one of the major nationalities in former Yugoslavia, where they have historically concentrated in Macedonia and Kosovo. On the eve of the break-up of former Yugoslavia, the total number of Turks was around 150,000.<sup>1</sup> Today, according to the 1994 census, about 77,000 Turks live in the Republic of Macedonia. In Kosovo, their number is estimated to be around 60,000,<sup>2</sup> although the 1981 census put their number at around 11,000.<sup>3</sup>

### **TURKS OF FORMER YUGOSLAVIA AND THEIR IMMIGRATION TO TURKEY**

Around 200,000 Turks become citizens of the Serb-Croat-Sloven Kingdom in 1919.<sup>4</sup> However, in 30 years their number was down by half. Nevertheless, Turks were a recognised

nationality in Socialist Yugoslavia from its onset, like the other major ethno-national groups with their own mother-states outside the borders of Yugoslavia. They constituted a major branch of Balkan Turks, by and large, with extensive minority rights in comparison with the Turks of Greece, Bulgaria and Romania.

Only 95,940 persons were registered as Turks in the 1948 census of the Socialist Yugoslav Federation after the Second World War. The dramatic decrease in their number from 1919 to 1948 was mainly due to their emigration from Yugoslavia between 1923-1933 when over 100,000 Turks (among them other Muslim populations such as Albanians, Macedonian Muslims and Bosniacs) immigrated to Turkey.<sup>5</sup> In 1938, an Emigration Agreement between Turkey and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was signed, but the available data suggests that the 1923-1933 migrations were far greater than the one that followed the 1938 agreement.<sup>6</sup> Under the emigration agreement signed on 11 July 1938, Turkey agreed to accept 40,000 families from Yugoslavia in six years. This, like the one in 1953, was a voluntary immigration agreement, so the Turkish government was not obliged to take care of their settlement. The Yugoslav government was to pay TL500 for each family as compensation.<sup>7</sup> The number of Turks in Yugoslavia jumped to 203,908 in 1953.<sup>8</sup> The drastic increase in the number of Turks in just five years, between 1948 and 1953, is indeed striking, too. This increase cannot be explained by any reverse population movement because there was none, nor was it due to natural factors. It had political reasons. First, the Turks who had not left Yugoslavia in the inter-war period and during the war were subject to political persecution immediately after World War II under the Socialist regime. In January 1948, 17 Macedonian Turks were founded guilty of treason in the so-called Yücelciler case.<sup>9</sup> Yücel was a Turkish organisation founded in the aftermath of the war. The Yugoslav authorities claimed it was an underground, anticommunist terrorist organisation. Members of Yücel were tried as Turkish spies while the members of the Turkish nationality in general were treated as a Turkish fifth column. Turkey's position as a member of the Western Alliance as well as local Turks' generally anticommunist dispositions led the Yugoslav authorities to take an openly anti-Turkish stance in the post-war period. General antipathy towards the Turks as the symbol of Ottoman domination may as well be cited among the factors behind the anti-Turkish attitude in the then new state of Yugoslavia. Hence, most of the ethnic Turks registered themselves as Albanians or Gypsies in the 1948 census to escape the unwanted consequences of being Turks.

In contrast, most of the Turks, Albanians and Gypsies, who registered themselves as Albanians or Gypsies in 1948, chose to declare themselves Turks in 1953.<sup>10</sup> This was again for political reasons because 1953 was the year when Turkey and Yugoslavia concluded yet another 'voluntary migration' arrangement. The two governments included in the Balkan Alliance a clause on voluntary emigration of Turks from Yugoslavia. Between 1953 and 1960, 151,812 people immigrated to Turkey from Yugoslavia.<sup>11</sup> This group of immigrants included Albanians as well. In 1960, the number of Turks in the Yugoslav federation was 131,481.<sup>12</sup> About 30,000 of them left Yugoslav territories during the 1960s.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, between the years 1923 and 1933, 108,179 Turks, and between 1934 and 1960, 160,922 Turks emigrated from Yugoslavia to Turkey.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that, out of the latter figure, 56.4 per cent arrived in Turkey between the years 1953 and 1960.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, post-1923 immigration from Yugoslavia up to 1960, constitutes 22.4 percent of all immigration to the Republic of Turkey in that period.<sup>16</sup> Post World War II immigration from Socialist Yugoslavia, on the other hand, totalled to around 200,000. In other words, about two-thirds of all immigrants from Yugoslavia, in fact, migrated during the Socialist regime. It

must be noted here that most immigrants of Turkish or Albanian origin question these figures, which roughly total 310,000 since 1923 until the break-up of the second Yugoslavia. Their estimates range between half a million and one million.

According to the 1971 census, 108,552 Turks were living in Yugoslavia. In 1981, their number was down to 86,690.<sup>17</sup> Since the Turks were not known for their low birth rate and the 1970s were not among the years of significant migration to Turkey,<sup>18</sup> one possible explanation can again be found in the recurring process of shifting identities. After the 1974 Constitution, both the value of turning Albanian and the cost of remaining Turkish were high, especially in Kosovo, a region that became a heaven for the Albanians but not for the others. Therefore, although some Turkish families immigrated to Turkey, quite a few seem to have preferred to register themselves as Albanians in the next census.

It must be noted here that the practice of shifting identities seems to have stopped in the 1990s. Unlike the earlier practice, neither the Bosniacs nor the Albanians in the 1990s shifted their identity when faced with ethnic cleansing and persecution. This is despite the fact that they were labelled Turks and attacked as such by aggressive leaders who did not refrain from various forms of hate-speech against the Turks.<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, they clung increasingly to their ethnic identity as events unfolded. Since 1992, they have sought refuge again in Turkey<sup>20</sup> and in other countries, as victims of ethnic cleansing and war, together with their fellow countrymen of various ethnic backgrounds. Aggressive Serbian nationalism was responsible not only for the Balkan wars of the 1990s and the dissolution of Yugoslavia, but also for the intensification of radical nationalism of others in former Yugoslavia since 1980s. A new Bosniac nationalism was born almost afresh in the midst of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992-1995. Radical Albanian nationalism has reached its peak - indiscriminately to the detriment of the Serbs, Turks, Bosniacs and Gypsies - in Kosovo in the aftermath of the NATO operations against Serbia in 1999.

## **TURKS IN KOSOVO**

Turks did not officially exist in Kosovo until the 1951 census. However, despite the mass migration from Kosovo to Turkey after 1953, the number of Turks in Kosovo was registered at 33,000 in the 1961 census.<sup>21</sup> Their official number had dropped to 12,500 in 1971 and to 11,000 in 1981.<sup>22</sup> However, the true number of Turks has long been the subject of dispute and distortion in Kosovo. The local elections in 2000 would have been an opportunity for Turks to register themselves in Kosovo. However, in protest at UNMIK's refusal to print registration forms in Turkish, the Turks in Prizren and Pristina decided not to register.<sup>23</sup> It is not yet sure if they will change their minds after Bernard Kouchner's meeting with the Turkish Foreign Minister, Cem, in Ankara. It was announced after the four-hour long meeting that forms in Turkish would be prepared for distribution. The Turks demand their rights under the 1974 constitution that recognises Turkish as one of the three official languages in Kosovo.\*

Despite their constitutional rights, however, 1974-1989 has not been an easy period for the Turks of Kosovo. The Albanian authorities have, most of the time, followed a policy of Albanisation of Kosovo if not an anti-Turkish policy per se. As a result, many Turks have either chosen to assimilate or to shift their ethnic identity.<sup>24</sup> For instance, schools in Turkish opened in Kosovo in 1951, in line with the Yugoslav constitution. However, because of intense pressure on the Turks by the Albanians not to attend the Turkish schools, most of

them were closed over time. In the 1970s and 1980s, for the Kosovo Turks, attending Serbian schools was one way of keeping their Turkish identity.

Obviously religious affinity and marital ties as well as the relatively small size of the Turkish community were important factors behind the Albanisation of the Turks in Kosovo. However, it seems that none of these three factors can alone explain this hegemonic relationship. For instance, the same is not true for Bosniac-Turkish relations, even if the Bosniacs are also Muslim and the two groups traditionally inter-marry. Although the ethnic Turks were much smaller in number in Bosnia-Herzegovina, they were able to keep and express their ethnic identity better than they could do in Kosovo. The distinguishing factor here is the strength or the intensity of the nationalism of the larger group. Albanian nationalism in former Yugoslavia has been and is one of the strongest nationalisms in the Balkans. Although nationalism does not differentiate between different 'others', the Turk was a particularly special 'other' for the Albanians with whom they share the same religion and culture.

The two Turkish political parties formed after 1989 in Kosovo, have long represented two diametrically opposed political positions. The Turkish Democratic Union Party (TDP), which was established in July 1990 in Prizren, emphasises a separate Turkish identity, is openly against Albanisation and calls for civic co-operation among all the nationalities of Kosovo. The Turkish Peoples' Party (TPP), which was established in May 1992, has close relations with Albanian leader Ibrahim Rugova's Democratic Union. It has long stressed the need to act together with the Albanians with whom its followers have identified on the basis of religion.

Belonging to the same faith, however, was not necessarily the underlying factor in the TPP's co-operation with the Albanians. Their emphasis was on the need to co-operate with the Albanians for political reasons and to survive the Serbian repression by siding with the most numerous community in Kosovo. However, the cost of this united-we-stand-divided-we-fall approach was further marginalisation in Kosovo because, in their dealings with the Turks, the Albanians more often than not used religion to enhance ethnic assimilation. Islam has long been a valuable tool in the hands of the radical Albanian nationalists, who are otherwise not necessarily religious.

According to the TPP line, being a minor minority left the Turks no option under Serbian rule and Albanian hegemony in Kosovo other than to act together with the Albanians. The TDP's line is quite the opposite. According to TDP representatives, the Turkish minority must defend its ethnic identity against an immediate danger, that is, the Albanisation of Kosovo, which necessarily means eradication of Turkish ethnicity there. The Serbian authorities were also aware of this threat perception and acted accordingly after 1989 when they unilaterally abolished the constitutional autonomy of Kosovo. They left the Turks relatively free.

While the TDP did not participate in boycotting the September 1990 elections, the TPP responded positively to the Albanians' call to boycott anything that might justify Serbian rule in Kosovo. However, because the TDP had far more supporters, most Turks have participated in all the elections since then. Albanians have traditionally accused the Turks in Kosovo of collaboration with the Serbian regime and opportunism. Not boycotting the elections became further proof of this. When the Albanians lost their jobs in the post-1989 period, particularly in 1991, Turks continued to keep their jobs in Kosovo. While Serbs banned the Albanian broadcasting of Radio Television Pristina in July 1990, they allowed Turkish-language (and Serbian and Romani) broadcasting. All these further deepened Albanian resentment of the Turks. The Turks' response to these accusations was based on their genuine fear of Albanian

hegemony in Kosovo. Furthermore, it was a notorious claim of radical Albanian nationalists that there was no Turkish ethnicity worth mentioning in Kosovo. The Turkish community knew well the negative stance of the Albanian political parties in Kosovo - a stance which begun to change only after the NATO operation and due to the presence of Turkish troops in KFOR.<sup>25</sup> The Turks of Kosovo have long felt the threat of ethnic cleansing by the Serbs and have been ethnically marginalised through assimilation by the Albanians. This was true even in areas where they have traditionally been concentrated, such as Prizren<sup>26</sup> and Pristina, if not in pockets like the Mamu?a village.<sup>27</sup> This time, the Turks have to register with the UNMIK as one of the recognised minorities in Kosovo. It must be underlined here that most Albanian civic leaders in Kosovo also criticise this attitude against the Turks, in the name of democracy and multiculturalism.

Since the establishment of the UNMIK in June 1999, the Turks have re-organised themselves into a civic platform. They were represented through a committee of the UN Chief Administrator Bernard "Kouchner's Transnational Council of Kosovo that is expected to develop into some kind of executive authority and even government."<sup>28</sup> One year after the NATO operation, under the Provisional Administrative Authority, while Kosovo prepared for local elections, the Turkish representatives at the Transnational Council are preparing to boycott its meetings. It is ironic that the 2000 elections in Kosovo might become the first elections the Turks boycott in Kosovo or elsewhere thanks to UNMIK.

Today there are 24 political parties registered in Kosovo, largest of which are Ibrahim Rugova's Democratic Alliance of Kosovo and former KLA leader Hasim Taci's Party of Democratic Progress. After tense relations in the past, both Rugova and Taci have promised a multiethnic Kosovo and, in particular, seem closer to respecting the Turkish identity, partly thanks to the presence of Turkish troops in Kosovo. However, many Turks in Kosovo do not feel at home in Kosovo any more, especially after the war in 1999. It is estimated that about 20,000 arrived in Turkey during the refugee flow from Kosovo.<sup>29</sup> This seemed to be the final exodus of Turks from Kosovo. Most of the Turks that returned their homeland in Kosovo found a resentment towards anything non-Albanian. Furthermore, since then, they have had to struggle not only against the Albanians' regular accusations that they collaborated with the Serbian regime, but also against the so-called anti-Turkish practices of UNMIK.

## **WHAT TO EXPECT?**

Turks, who have long been associated with the powerful Ottoman rule in the Balkans, have been facing the difficulties of remaining as an ethnic minority in the 'new' nation-states. Having been subject to waves of expulsion and immigration for at least five generations, Turks are again in a particularly vulnerable position in the Balkans following the break-up of Yugoslavia. In the lands where once they were a relatively strong nationality with extensive constitutional rights, they now have to cope with the consequences of ethnic nationalism and the separatism of others. They are caught between many fires. They have already lost their numerical strength due to the waves of emigration from Yugoslavia and they have long been subject to assimilation by the larger Albanian nationality. They now feel the tension of further marginalisation in former Yugoslav territories.

The case of the Turks in Kosovo is a delicate one. The future status of Kosovo being a question mark, the Turks are concerned about their ethnic and civic identities as well as their mere survival in Kosovo. The general statements to the effect that the international community realises that Kosovo is not a territory inhabited only by an Albanian majority and

a marginalised Serbian minority do not necessarily comfort the Turks. The recent tension created by the UNMIK's resistance to print the registration forms in Turkish is a case in point. However, ignoring the existence of the Turks in Kosovo or violating their rights is a costly mistake. This move will effect not only the Turks but will further endanger the chances of building a multiethnic and democratic Kosovo. By ignoring the Turks, the international administration is building a problem it will not be able to solve. It is not hard to speculate that the international stance of UNMIK will erode if it turns out to be part of the problem, instead of an honest broker aimed at facilitating a solution in Kosovo.

Whatever its political status might become in the long run, the future of Kosovo depends on the democratisation of the region and on the de-mystification of nationalism for all nationalities. The Turks of Kosovo have long been caught between two fires in their immediate environment between the Albanians and Serbs. Now, they feel under fire from again two sides: the radical Albanian nationalists and the UNMIK. Their future seems dimmer than that of their relatives elsewhere in the Balkans. As such, it must not come as a surprise that they feel the pressure of making a relatively urgent decision for their own future. Unless the international administration in Kosovo realises that Kosovo is also the home of 'others', including the Turks, given the present conditions, that difficult decision may soon be given in favour of the final exodus of Turks from Kosovo. As this will further destroy the multiethnic environment in Kosovo, the current practice of ignoring the Turks will be registered as a historic mistake on the part of the international community.

---

1 It is noteworthy that Turks are usually forgotten in many of the recent works on Yugoslavia. For instance, the national composition tables in Susan Woodward's otherwise detailed and informative book, do not include any figure for the population of Turks. See Susan Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War*, Washington DC: The Brookings Institute, 1995, pp. 32-35.

2 This figure is the most quoted estimate by Turkish sources since the NATO operation in Kosovo in the summer of 1999.

3 The population numbers here and elsewhere must be treated with a margin of error. Due to political manipulation or lack of reliable data, population statistics in the Balkans are usually far from reflecting the reality on the ground.

4 Vladimir Ortakovski, *Minorities in the Balkans*, Skopje, 1998, p. 129.

5 Cevat Geray Geray, *Türkiye'den ve Türkiye'ye Göçler ve Göçmenlerin <skan> (1923-1961)*, Türk <ktisadi Gelişmesi Araştırma Projesi No. 9, Ankara: Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Maliye Enstitüsü, 1962, Table IV, p. 11.

Geray's work is widely acknowledged as the most reliable source on the subject.

6 For the text of the agreement, see the publication by the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Albania, *The Truth on Kosovo*, Tirana: Encyclopaedia Publishing House, Tirana, 1993, pp. 188-190.

7 Turkey and Yugoslavia signed two protocols, in 1950 and 1956, in Ankara and Belgrade, respectively, concerning compensation for Turkish properties in Yugoslavia. The immigrants, however, emphasise that most of them received no compensation due to bureaucratic formalities in Yugoslavia and Turkey.

8 Hugh Poulton, *Balkanlar: Çatışan Azınlıklar, Çatışan Devletler*, İstanbul: Sarmal, 1993, p. 112.

9

10 This time, being an Albanian was far more dangerous than being a Turk, especially after Yugoslav-Albanian relations deteriorated. 1953 was also the year when Albania left Cominform, five years after the expulsion of Yugoslavia.

11 Most of these immigrants have arrived in Turkey between 1956-1960, see Geray, p.13.

12 The 1948, 1953 and 1960 figures are taken from Poulton, pp. 111-112.

13 Kirişçi, 'Post Second World War Immigration from the Balkan Countries to Turkey', *Turkish Review of Balkan Studies Annual* 1994/95 (2), p. 179.

14 Geray, p. 11.

15 Geray, p. 13.

16	Geray,	p.	12.
17	Poulton,	p.	112.

18 Less than 2,000 people immigrated to Turkey from Yugoslavia in the 1970s, see Kirişçi, p. 179.

19 The Muslim communities of the Balkans are traditionally called Turks by the others. They are perceived as the leftovers of the Ottomans and the remnants of the Ottoman legacy in the Balkans. However, the ethnic Turks were not necessarily included among the ruling élite in the Ottoman Empire because they were Turkish. As such, not only the Bosniacs and Albanians, but also the Serbs, were as Ottoman as the Turks were, if not more so.

20 According to UNHCR World Refugee Survey (1995), the number of Bosnian refugees in Turkey was around 20,000. However, because Turkey did not ask for any visa and practically opened its borders to Bosnian refugees during the war, their number was claimed to be almost ten times this figure by refugee associations in Turkey. Between 1992 and 1995, most of Bosnians arrived in Turkey as tourists to be hosted by their relatives in Turkey. On Turkish policy towards Bosnia, see Şule Kut, 'Turkish Diplomatic Initiatives for Bosnia-Herzegovina', in Günay Göksu Özdoğan and Kemali Saybaşı (eds.), *Balkans: a Mirror of New International Order*, Istanbul: Eren Yayınları, 1995, pp. 295-315. In the year 2000, there are only seven Bosniac families left in the Kırklareli Refugee Camp that was built for the Bosnian refugees. The camp was destined to host the Kosovo refugees in 1999.

21	Arslan	Tekin,	Balkan	Volkan,	Istanbul:	Ötüken,	1993,	p.	299.
22									Ibid.

23 Forms were printed in English, Albanian and Serbian languages as these are recognised as official languages since

Rambouillet.

\* At the time of writing, it appears that the negotiations to resolve the language issue were continuing.

24 The assimilation by the larger Muslim group is a common phenomenon in the Balkans. In the case of Kosovo, it was the Turks who have either assimilated or shifted their ethnic identity for social and political reasons since the 1970s. The major difference between assimilation and shifting ethnic identity is that the former happens and ends whereas the latter is a recurring process. In other words, the groups who shift their identity are not assimilated forever; they return to their previous ethnic identity whenever the socio-political conditions change.

25 There is a 1000-strong Turkish troop presence in KFOR. These troops are stationed in Prizren, Mamuşa and Draga?

26 However, the vast majority of 'Albanian' inhabitants of Prizren were also using Turkish in their daily affairs, at least, until the NATO intervention in Kosovo.

27 Mamuşa is an all-Turkish village near Prizren with about five thousand inhabitants.

28 Milan Jokic, 'Multiethnic Kosovo without Serbs, Romanies, Muslims', AIM, 8 November 1999, p. 2 ([www.aimpress.org](http://www.aimpress.org)).

29 Again, because Turkey opened its borders without questioning the ethnic background of refugees or 'tourists' from Kosovo in 1999, it is hard to come up with an exact number of Kosovo refugees in Turkey or to estimate the percentage of Turks among them.