The Rapidly Changing State of Kosovo

In February of 2008, Kosovo officially declared its independence from Serbia. While Kosovo was previously a part of Serbia, a traditionally Eastern Orthodox country, it has a very heavy amount of population with influence from Albania, which is a heavy Muslim country. The area had been attempting to gain independence since 1999, but wanted to do so peacefully. Despite having peacefully declared independence, the process is far from over. Many countries, including Serbia, still have not officially recognized Kosovo as an independent country 8 years later. This, along with other issues, has lead to a growing unhappiness in the country of Kosovo.

Andrew Testa photographed a regular Kosovan community in late May 2016. In this photograph, a large amount of Muslim Kosovan citizens are shown leaving a mosque that has been turned to Islamic extremism. The presence of the unwanted Islamic influence along with the ongoing turmoil in the young country leads to a noticeable tension in the picture. It’s evident that everyone in the picture is effected by these multiple troubles in various ways. This photograph captures the intense struggle faced by Kosovan citizens with their fight for independence.

In his essay “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”, W.E.B. Du Bois details the black people’s struggle during the late 19th and early 20th century. He describes how despite black people being free, they are far from actually having the freedom that people of some other races have. Kosovan citizens face a similar issue with their independence. While they’ve officially declared their independence from Serbia, and many countries recognize that independence, Serbia itself does not recognize the independence. This causes many issues for Kosovo, while it does operate mostly by itself, it still receives plenty of influence from Serbia. People of Kosovo, and the people in the photograph itself, face a similar type of oppression described by Du Bois. The emotions stemming from this free but not free struggle are evident in the
people in the photograph. As people are leaving their local mosque they are all looking down, away from each other. The expressions on their face are filled with sadness, and possibly even pain.

The way the people in the photograph are looking down and keeping to themselves represents ideas from Du Bois. Ideas from Du Bois may also be relevant to some ideas presented by David Berreby in his essay “Rituals and Traditions: It Takes a Tribe”. Berreby describes how people tend to put themselves into groups along with other people that identify with something in common. In addition, he describes how these groups will often find other groups with opposing thoughts and opinions as create an “us versus them” mentality against the other group. The people of Kosovo are all in a group together as a country fighting for their independence from Serbia.

However, the photograph shows something going against the ideas of Berreby. The people in the photograph all seem to not want to acknowledge that they are there along with the other people. Hardly anyone is talking to anyone else, and no one is looking at each other, just looking down, even looking away from the camera. Despite being in the same country, the conflict of people being from both Serbian and Albanian origin make it hard for people to relate to each other, possibly making it hard to be part of the group. The result of this is instead of the group acting as a group, many people are acting for themselves instead.

Artjoms Ivlevs and Roswitha M. King wrote a detailed journal report titled “Kosovo – Winning its Independence but Losing its People? Recent Evidence on Emigration Intentions and Preparedness to Migrate”. In their report that began writing in 2012, Ivlevs and King go into detail about the interest in emigration in Kosovo. They find the curious results showing that despite gaining their independence, interest in moving out of the country permanently has greatly increased in both the Albanian majority and Serbian minority. This exemplifies the potential behavior of Kosovans acting for themselves instead of as a group, as they would rather leave their home country behind instead of staying to fight for it. In addition, Ivlevs and King detail data that shows the wealthy have a higher percentage per
capita of people wanting to move away, showing a growing lack of faith in the economic power of the newly growing Kosovan government. However, there is one more factor that may contribute to the people of Kosovo falling apart as a group. The introduction of Islamic extremist ideas may also induce a large amount of fear, as well as a potential feeling of guilt.

Influence from the Islamic state can be a very scary thing. In “ISIS, Heritage, and the Spectacles of Destruction in the Global Media” Ömür Harmanşah explains the strategies of ISIS for destroying icons and artifacts in order to create a presence in the media. Ömür brings up a “scorched-earth” policy as explained by Massoud Hamed that ISIS is adopting. This means they have a policy of destroying artifacts and remarkable historic landmarks in order to both gain attention, and destroy the ideas of previously established people in the area. By wiping out the physical presence of other ideas, ISIS has a clean slate to install their own ideas. The photograph shows Kosovans leaving a mosque that is being converted to Islamic extremism by ISIS. In the run-down looking town it can been seen that there’s a sign posted detailing plans for a new mosque to replace the style of the established mosque. This application of iconoclasm by ISIS in Kosovo may induce an amount of fear in Kosovan citizens.

Citizens of Kosovo were used to going to a specific mosque that preaches familiar ideas, so the sudden implementation of a new mosque with new ideas brings a sense of shock that induces fear. ISIS makes sure that the switch is as shocking as possible with their aggressive and forceful tactics. While the fight for independence leaves people disheartened and tired, the sudden influence could bring a sense of guilt for letting the new, generally unfavorable ideas into the communities of Kosovo. This, along with the separation between Albanian and Serbian groups as well as the interest in moving away from the country, make it very hard for citizens to come together as a group to fight either for further independence or against incoming Islamic influence.

The newly independent country of Kosovo still faces myriad problems after gaining its independence. Citizens still fight for total independence from Serbia, while at the same time ISIS
attempts to expand its influence to Kosovo. The people of Kosovo have various difference causing issues for them, preventing them from working together for their goals. Fear and guilt may permeate into the population due to these stresses, causing a pain in people due to the various unwelcome changes in the Kosovan community. This photograph of newly free, yet struggling, Kosovan citizens captures the pain and emotions that people have for their small changing country.


Inquiry Question: How does this photograph of Muslim people leaving a mosque turned Islamic extremist show the struggle and feeling towards a profound change in the community of Kosovo?