

COMMENT: "Legalised" Division of Mitrovica

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The UN Mitrovica agreement effectively legitimises the Serbian parallel structures it claimed it wanted to remove.

A much-trumpeted UN sponsored agreement to reunify Mitrovica in northern Kosovo now appears to have practically legalised the division of the town instead.

The chief of United Nations Mission in Kosovo, UNIMK, Michael Steiner, signed the accord with Serbian deputy prime minister Nebojsa Covic on November 25. Ostensibly, it was intended to loosen Belgrade's grip on northern Mitrovica, which is predominantly populated by ethnic Serbs, and open a way for the return of ethnic Albanians who form a majority in the rest of Kosovo.

The ethnic division emerged after the NATO intervention, when Serbs expelled from other parts of Kosovo fled to northern Mitrovica and pushed Albanians into the southern half of the town.

A closer look at the agreement shows that it stripped the largely Albanian municipal assembly of its powers in the north of the town. In addition, the UNMIK administration due to be formed in the north has been designed to discourage Albanians from seeking jobs on it. The accord also provided no framework to encourage Albanians to go back to homes they used to occupy before the war.

Many Albanians in Mitrovica have been slowly waking up to realise the effects that Steiner's document will have on our community.

On the day it was signed, I received hundreds of phone calls from different parts of Kosovo and from all over the world congratulating me on the "reunification" of Mitrovica, my hometown.

At first sight, the agreement sounded revolutionary. For three and a half years since the arrival of NATO troops in Kosovo, the divided town has been a black mark on the international community's record in Kosovo. This was because UNMIK controlled only the southern, Albanian populated side of the town while Belgrade ran parallel structures for Serbs north of the river Ibar.

Now, Steiner tells us he has managed to convince Covic to give up the control over northern Mitrovica. But, the question is, to what cost?

My scepticism was first aroused when I found out that Faruk Spahia, chairman of the Local Council of Mitrovica, was informed about the "great news" of reunification by journalists of the from RTK national television. You'd expect the head of UNMIK to have been the first to break this news to the elected local government!

Steiner eventually did invite the local council leaders for dinner, only to tell them that, in order to achieve the reunification of Mitrovica, they had to refrain from using their powers over the northern part of the city. Confusion was reinforced by the fact that the Local Council of Mitrovica was stripped of the formal powers given to it by UNMIK decree in 2000.

With this agreement, UNMIK is basically telling them that they will not have the means to do the job they

were elected to do.

I wanted my international friends in Mitrovica to explain what this agreement actually meant. One of them was kind enough to explain that Steiner had, in fact, given way to Covic, who was negotiating on behalf of the Serbs living on the north of Mitrovica. He showed me the agreement, signed by Steiner and Covic, which confirmed my worst fears.

I found out Covic had demanded that, if Belgrade is to halt its support for parallel structures in the south of Mitrovica, UNMIK will have to convince Mitrovica's local council, dominated by Albanians, to give up their authority over the Serbian side of the town. Steiner went along with this condition.

Practically, with this agreement, north Mitrovica is again going to get a special treatment compared with the rest of Kosovo. The governing procedures which are applied to all municipalities in the region will not be applied in north Mitrovica. This means that the south will, de facto, be functioning as a parallel entity, only this time supported by UNMIK. The organisation called the United Nations has served to divide the town.

To find out what the Serbs were thinking about the agreement, I turned to TV Most, a local TV station based in Zvecan, a Serbian enclave near Mitrovica. I heard the Covic statement promising Mitrovica Serbs that all the present employees of the parallel administration will be employed in the same position by the UNMIK administration that is due to be established in the north.

TV Most was founded by the former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic's party. This time it was telling the truth. The details about employment in northern Mitrovica administration were confirmed in the document I had been shown earlier.

To make matters worse, the job openings for local administrators in north Mitrovica were advertised only in the Serbian language, making it clear that UNMIK did not want Albanians applying for the posts.

After the TV debate organised by Koha Vision and by me, as the director of Radio- Television of Mitrovica, I asked John Rogers, the International Administrator of Mitrovica, why the openings were not advertised with the local Albanian media. His reply was laughable - that all the money earmarked for advertising the jobs had been used up due to the high cost of Serbian newspaper advertisements.

It's no wonder local Kosovars are fed up with UNMIK's biased policies and double standards. The limiting of job opportunities to just one community is one more proof of that.

Despite all this, some of my friends still don't understand what is going on. They are optimistic about the latest developments. Halil, who used to live in the north before the war and whose house is occupied by a Serb family, says, "We will be back in our homes in no time ... we are run by internationals and international standards will not allow the occupation of other people's homes."

But a person sitting next to us chimed in, "The same people who stopped you returning home will stop you again, only now they have the backing of international community to do it."

This is what actually happened to Murat Shabani, an Albanian who decided to go back to his house in northern Mitrovica, a few days after the agreement was reached.

On the day he arrived with his family, a grenade was hurled at the house. We believe it was thrown by the paramilitary group known as the “Bridgewatchers”, young men paid by the Serbian ministry of interior, MUP, to keep Albanians out of northern Mitrovica.

Another issue stemming from the agreement is the fate of Albanian houses, which were destroyed in northern Mitrovica. If Albanians decided to go back, despite the great security risks, it’s highly unlikely they would be granted rebuilding permits by the Serbian local authorities.

Three weeks after the joyful media frenzy over the “reunification of Mitrovica”, Kosovo Albanians are only now beginning to realise the real consequences of the agreement.

Most of the local Albanian media, especially the most watched Radio-Television of Kosovo, RTK, interpreted the agreement as a triumph over Serbian parallel structures. This comes hardly as a surprise considering that RTK is financed by UNMIK and its managing board was appointed by Steiner's predecessor, Hans Haekkerup.

Other Albanian language media, apart from Koha Vision and the Radio-Television of Mitrovica, also waxed enthusiastic over the "liberation" of northern Mitrovica, churning out patriotic songs in celebration.

However, it is clear to me that, by signing this agreement, Steiner has, in fact way given legitimacy to the Serbian parallel structures in the north of the town.

In the TV debate, John Rogers did not rule out the possibility that the UNMIK administration in northern Mitrovica might turn into a municipality of its own one day.

Veton Surroi, the editor of the biggest daily newspaper in Kosovo, was also sceptical about the latest turn of events in Mitrovica. “Belgrade finally removed a lot of pressure coming from the international community and in the meantime reinforced its position in northern Mitrovica,” he wrote in his column.

It seems most people are waiting to see the first practical effects of the Steiner-Covic agreement. As of now, things do not look good.

I fear that Belgrade's plan for eventual partition of Kosovo has taken a step forward. with Steiner's signature on an agreement which, in effect, legalises the old Serb parallel structures that UNMIK was claiming it wanted to remove.

Mitrovica has been divided again, but it is not official yet. I am convinced that Kosovar Albanians can expect similar “blunders” from UNMIK when it starts negotiating on the future status of Kosovo.

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