

## **Comment: Albanians Lose the Plot**

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Last week's violence in Kosovo has played into Belgrade's hands by increasing the likelihood of partition.

There will be time enough for Kosovo Albanian political players to mull over how they let their own extremists last week score a disastrous own goal.

They have seriously alienated international allies, played into Belgrade's hands and maybe undermined the chances of independence - the only goal Albanian politicians could agree on until now without pulling a gun on each other.

While Serbian houses in central and southern Kosovo were burning on March 17 and 18, many of the international media were reporting the same story they had left off from writing in 1999: clashes between Serbs and Albanians. In fact, something else was happening.

Radical Albanian extremists - war veterans from the Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA, unemployed youths, student activists and probably a few cells of the Albanian National Army, which has been trying to destabilise western Macedonia recently - had lost patience with the international community, which has been dragging its feet for almost five years on Kosovo's final status.

Kosovo - still legally part of the state of Serbia and Montenegro - has really been a United Nations protectorate since June 1999, after 11 weeks of NATO-led air strikes forced Serbia to withdraw all its forces.

The extremists tried a recipe that has already been tested in other parts of the former Yugoslavia - read Croatia and Republika Srpska. First, expel ethnic minorities and then wait to be rewarded by the international community with a state, or at least (like the Republika Srpska) with an entity.

After the initial problems started in the northern divided town of Mitrovica, a clear pattern of violence emerged in central and southern Kosovo. Mobs targeted Serbs living in isolated, small enclaves and some of those who fled are now guarded in KFOR military camps.

Houses and churches were burned. On trial in The Hague, Slobodan Milosevic would be proud to see how many students his regime left behind it in Kosovo. Every Kosovo Albanian remembers how that same regime in the summer of 1998 systematically burned Albanian houses, village by village.

The political framework is different now. The West is engaged in its "war on terrorism" and has little sympathy for another wave of burning and looting in the Balkans. Instead of Milosevic ruling Kosovo, there is now a UN mission.

Moreover, some clashes have pitted Albanian extremists against international troops. UN cars were set on fire while some UN staff spent fearful nights, hiding in UN buildings or in private houses.

Tensions between the local population and international forces have been simmering for at least a year. The locals should not always be blamed for it. But the violent explosion over the last week has now made that animosity public.

The international forces are not close allies of the Albanians any more. For some groups, they are even an obstacle to independence.

The West's message is now also different. In a clear warning, the Council of Europe on March 19 sent an open letter to Prime Minister of Kosovo Bajram Rexhepi, "The attempts to exploit the escalation of ethnic violence to further the political cause of the majority population, are unacceptable."

It went on, "It is already evident that the Albanian majority in Kosovo - and its political leadership - are failing to demonstrate that they can create a future of Kosovo in which all its people will have a chance to live in peace and stability."

It is not only a question of shifting foreign sympathies. The Albanian population is facing its worst nightmare scenario - the partition of Kosovo, which the hardliners' short-sighted strategy has suddenly made possible.

Serbs may not be able to return home to central and southern Kosovo, but will probably be crammed alongside those who still live in the northern enclaves that adjoin Serbia proper, northern Mitrovica, Zubin Potok and Leposavic.

Both Belgrade and the UN, for their own selfish reasons, will do everything to keep them there, even if force is needed to separate them from the Albanians. It will be a de facto, if not a de jure, Serbian entity within Kosovo.

The UN mission cannot let all the Serbs leave Kosovo. It does not want to admit that the "multi-ethnic" Kosovo, which it was supposed to be building, was a failure.

Some wonder whether the international soldiers guarding the Serbs in northern Mitrovica are there to combat Albanian extremists or to block the Serbs from leaving - which would confirm the final failure of the international community.

Belgrade has used the events of the last few days to score - for the first time in the last 15 years - an important diplomatic victory.

While some local media have continued to spread hate speech as ever, the politicians are telling western officials and media exactly what they want to hear. The crisis has to be solved through diplomatic means, there is no sabre-rattling in those words.

Even the hard-line nationalists of the Serbian Radical Party have condemned the burning of the mosques in Nis and Belgrade. The hooligans who set them on fire have been charged. The same nationalists who dreamed of creating a "Greater Serbia" and instigated so many wars are lecturing the EU on the virtues of integration.

Of course, there is a hidden agenda here. No serious Serbian politician does not realise Kosovo is lost, and that a new, pragmatic approach is needed. The Serbs' new line is to take as much as they can. At this point that means the division of Kosovo, with the northern part remaining under the protection of international forces but ruled by Belgrade.

Belgrade dreams of a Bosnian solution here, with a Kosovo Serb entity created on the same lines as Republika Srpska. This strategy is already being discussed, with a cantonisation plan floated a couple of weeks ago by the Serbian prime minister Vojislav Kostunica and recently echoed by Miroslav Labus, the deputy prime minister.

With the strong support of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Belgrade will do everything to keep the remaining Serbs in the north. The strategy of building parallel institutions that was already in place in northern Mitrovica, and which has infuriated the Albanians over the last few years, will continue. The Serbian state will continue to issue documents to the people of the northern Serbian enclave, building up a Serbian health and educational system there, paying pensions and so on.

Many of these Serbs in any case have nowhere else to go. Some have already tried - and failed - to relocate to Serbia in 1999, when their new neighbours called them "shiptars", a pejorative expression for Albanians.

UN officials in Kosovo have refused to give the press any logical explanation for these latest events, which tells a lot about the confusion and disarray in their ranks.

In the short term, UN officials in Kosovo will try to downplay recent violence, to calm the situation and boost their own morale. A similar message will come from the Albanian politicians; the celebration of the fifth anniversary of NATO air-strikes is about to be held jointly in Kosovo as a reminder of their common aims.

But in the long term, the UN is in a bind. To protect minorities, they have to follow Belgrade's agenda and keep them divided from the Albanians in the north. The Albanians will not lightly accept this division, which means that new violence - even a new war - could be on the horizon.

As for the Kosovo Serbs, they have served Belgrade's interests for a long time, both under Milosevic and since, though only for electoral purposes, when their voices counted.

For five years they have also served the UN. They remained in their insecure, isolated enclaves, their very existence justifying UN reports of the "multi-ethnic" society that was emerging thanks to the international administration's efforts.

What about the Kosovo Albanians who suffered so much under Milosevic, a suffering that Serbia systematically refuses to acknowledge?

They might perhaps be best described in the same terms that Serbia's nationalistic writer Dobrica Cosic once employed for the Serbs: a nation that wins the war but loses the peace.

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