

## **Comment: New Stance Towards Kosovo Minorities Vital**

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The recent violence in Kosovo was largely a consequence of a failure to integrate its minorities.

Both the international administration in Kosovo and local Albanian politicians are equally to blame for minorities not being accepted as equal inhabitants there.

The failure of the international administration started when it turned a blind eye to the atrocities committed in the summer of 1999 when the Albanians, expelled by Serbian regime, returned to Kosovo.

Serbs, Roma and others were killed in mob violence as KFOR simply watched. Whole settlements were burned down. According to UNHCR, after NATO's arrival, about 230,000 people left (including Serbs and other minorities) and their property illegally occupied.

Since 1999, attacks against minorities have decreased considerably, but hardly any perpetrators of the violence have been brought to justice.

Discrimination against minorities remains widespread, which has been recognised by the international community in different human rights reports, but not eliminated in practise.

Most international officials have adopted the views of the Albanian majority, and the requests of the minorities have been subordinated to those of the majority.

In fields such as reconstruction, employment and access to education, the Albanians and the international administration have accepted discrimination.

From the start, the international administration lacked a comprehensive minority policy. It failed to create basic conditions either for the integration of minorities, or for their return.

From 2001, an evolving minority policy also pursued double standards. While focusing on Serbs, the other communities, such as Bosniaks, Gorani, Roma, Ashkali, Egyptians, Turks and Croats, were neglected.

The Serbs living in their enclaves or north of the River Ibar in and around the northern part of Mitrovica at least control their local politics, society and economy.

The other communities live alongside Albanians and barely participate in politics, society and economics. Discrimination and lack of economic perspective are especially marked among Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians.

The international administration, however, has focussed on Serbian participation in Kosovo structures and in barely sustainable return projects.

Some Serbian villages were reconstructed, but these Potemkin structures have needed constant protection

and have not contributed much to the goal of reconciliation.

Provoking an entirely unjustified envy among their Albanian neighbours, they have turned into new enclaves with limited contact with Albanians.

The hypocrisy of the international administration is illustrated by the fact that Roma, Ashkali or Egyptians - equally in need of reconstruction - have seen no comparable effort, in spite of the fact that several communities have returned, some of them after being forcibly returned from western Europe.

The international administration felt comfortable with the illusion of building up a multi-ethnic society. It could not admit its failure, because the war in 1999 was conducted in the name of human rights and it governs the province.

In addition, several western European countries were determined to send their refugees from the region back to Kosovo and Roma, for example, could only be deported to a functioning multi-ethnic Kosovo.

The international administration's biggest failure was that it did not scrutinise the Albanian majority's attitude towards minorities and did not develop a consistent policy to counter this negative attitude.

Albanians make up the overwhelming majority in Kosovo and have obtained a right to determine policy. However, this should not include the right to decide who is allowed to live in Kosovo or who can study at the University of Pristina.

In several places, returns and the reconstruction of houses were blocked. Non-Albanians hardly dare study in Pristina. The international administration simply accepts this, as it fears threats of violence could then turn into acts of violence.

Much of the responsibility for the recent mob violence lies with the Albanian politicians and with civil society, which has not distanced itself from an attitude that violence against non-Albanians is permissible or at least tolerable under certain circumstances.

Many consider killings of Serbs and Roma, as well as the expulsion of minorities and the illegal occupation of their property, as justifiable.

Criminal acts against minorities remain unsolved because Albanian witnesses remain silent when questioned.

Fear of retaliation, and a specific culture of "solidarity" among Albanians engaged in a permanent fight with "others", along with a deep mistrust of the authorities, stops them from providing information.

Efforts should be made to rectify the discrimination against minorities and their status as second-class citizens.

With a few exceptions, such as Adem Demaqi, Albanian society has never seriously tackled either its discriminatory attitude or the crimes the Albanians have committed.

The media plays a crucial role in maintaining these attitudes. They portray Serbs as enemies and Roma as collaborators. Reports of violent attacks against minorities tend to suggest the Serbs themselves are the perpetrators, not the Albanians, and that Serbs have committed these crimes to destabilise Kosovo and prevent its independence.

Under these circumstances and considering Kosovo's depressing economic prospects, the people behind the pogroms can always find young men willing to use violence against minorities. These young men are aware that a large section of society does not consider them criminals, but as heroes of the independence struggle.

Albanian politics and society need finally to wake up. They should look into their own shortcomings and scrutinise their politics and society. So far they have not done so, fearing this could jeopardise the goal of all Kosovo Albanians, which is independence.

The international administration should undergo a similar process. It should admit its failure, develop a new approach and not play down the consequences of pogroms.

The recent mob violence may have ended the efforts to build up a Kosovo for all its ethnic communities. It may also have ended the dream of the Albanians of an independent and united Kosovo.

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