

## **Comment: Tough Times for Kosovo's Non-Albanians**

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Serbs, in particular, lack basic physical security in what remains a violent environment.

As you read this article, you are likely to be going about a “normal” day at work, getting dressed, drinking coffee or tea, or perhaps preparing children for school. At the back of your mind, worries about running late may be making you feel uneasy.

Perhaps you lack help with paying bills or household tasks. Then there are those of you who are unemployed, frustrated and worried, who are searching for work or business in the newspapers or via friendly contacts.

For non-Albanian communities in Kosovo, mainly Kosovo Serbs, however, going about a normal day triggers far more palpable anxieties - security concerns and fear.

On an average day, preparing children for school often means relying on an escort, sometimes by Kosovo Protection Forces, KFOR, teams or by the local police. Not long ago, it was common to see Serb children walking to school laughing and behaving without a care, while an armoured vehicle followed only few meters behind.

Going to work also means little. Too few non-Albanians are meaningfully employed. Those who are employed are limited by what they can do outside their village enclaves, provided an escort is available. Others who have farmland go about their work only under the watchful eye of KFOR forces.

A military presence is not always readily available, prompting families to hold back from sending children to school if it lies outside the village enclave. Without protection, Serb farmers are inclined to stay away from their lands, many of which have been abandoned because of security concerns. In some cases, the land is worked by armed neighbouring Albanian farmers. We are talking about the year 2004, not 1999.

Ethnic tensions create a very real security situation in Kosovo that is aggravated by the perceived lack of safety among vulnerable non-Albanians. Over the past five years, Kosovo Serbs and other non-Albanians have relied heavily on the military protection of KFOR to feel safe. Coming to terms with why and how they have reached this point is crucial. It is of particular importance when one is reminded that peacekeepers will remain in the province only for a finite period. What then?

The feeling of insecurity among Kosovo Serbs and other non-Albanians is based on past negative experiences of violence. How secure can people be expected to feel in their village enclaves when over the last five years they have suffered a series of violent acts? In addition to random killings, there have been assaults, bombings, thefts and incidents of arson and stoning. Seldom have perpetrators been identified or brought to justice, contributing to a perception that these acts can be committed with impunity.

One of my Serb interlocutors, who lives not far from Pristina, was robbed nearly a dozen times in the last few years. He was a prosperous farmer but now all his equipment, machinery and livestock, down to the last cow, have been stolen. He reported each theft to the police but they failed to identify any suspects. The police complained that no one cooperated to locate the suspects. Repeated failures like these on the part of law enforcement officials have further undermined any perception of security and trust among this segment of society.

During many discussions about security in Kosovo, I have heard too frequently, even from politicians, that security is the responsibility of KFOR and the police forces of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK. Of course, KFOR and the UNMIK authorities play a considerable role in this respect, but true security can only be supplied by one's neighbours and surrounding communities.

A recent appeal made by the troubled Ashkali people of Vushtrri/Vucitrn underlines this point. After returning in 2002, following a call from the UNMIK authorities, the families were again forced from their homes in March, when they again lost all their material possessions. For the past six months, these families have been living in the confines of a French military base for their own protection.

After failed attempts to relocate outside Kosovo, several of these families appealed to Kosovo municipal leaders, asking not for extra security precautions but simply for acceptance by their neighbours. They are right. Their neighbours can be the only real custodians of their safety.

Building up feelings of security is a long process. The violent events of March significantly (if not irreparably) damaged confidence-building measures made between these embattled communities. The latest wave of violence left a traumatic emotional imprint and painfully reminded non-Albanian communities of 1999, when violent reprisals against Serbs and Roma were at an all-time high. On several occasions, victims of the March violence told me they would not feel safe in their newly-rebuilt homes.

The EU High Representative Javier Solana, on a recent visit to Kosovo, said, "Schools and houses have been rebuilt but I want to see people returning and living there. If people do not live in these houses, the work remains unfinished." This "unfinished job" is directly related to security perceptions. It also means efforts to change this perception. This is a long, complicated, multi-dimensional, process.

The March events showed that violence in Kosovo may reappear at anytime. Small-scale acts of violence and attacks have, in fact, continued unabated in various places, even though KFOR troops have deemed the security situation to be "relatively calm" and have scaled back their troop presence in favour of other global priorities.

In the final analysis, March demonstrated how easy it was to destroy the relative "calm" that prevails on the surface of Kosovo's society. From a post-March perspective, we can see this proved misleading to many of the international players.

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