

## **Ethnic Divide Bridged in South-east Kosovo**

In the Anamorava region, the survival of ethnically-mixed workplaces and villages defies stereotypical images of a segregated society.

The backs of Serb villagers in Kusce, 47 kilometres south-east of Pristina, are twisted from years of carrying heavy churns, full of milk, to the village square.

There, they line up in front of the KABI dairy, owned by Ruzhdi Kastrati, which makes yogurt and other dairy products in Kosovo.

Jovan Milic, 50, admits he was once sceptical about working with Albanian traders. "I doubted I would get paid on time, as we don't have much contact with Albanians," he said.

"But when I saw people were getting paid on time and the fee was attractive, I decided to stop making cheese. It pays better to sell milk to this Albanian factory."

The ethnically-integrated workforce in Kusce may sound unusual in Kosovo, which is better known throughout the world for bitter divisions.

But the dairy in Kusce is only one of several examples in south-east Kosovo of Albanians and Serbs coming together more readily than they do elsewhere.

Ethnic relations deteriorated sharply in Kosovo when Slobodan Milosevic's regime took power and scrapped Kosovo's autonomy in 1989, forcing most Albanians out of their jobs in the public sector.

Since the end of the 1999 NATO bombing campaign, which resulted in Serbian forces withdrawing from Kosovo, the remaining Serbs have lived mainly in closely guarded enclaves, fearing retaliation when they venture outside.

The number of Serbs south of the main enclave that lies on the Serbian border is not known exactly. The European Stability Initiative, however, in a report in May, estimated that they make up some 75,000 of the 130,000 Kosovo Serb population.

The usual picture is that there is almost no interaction between the communities. But that does not correspond with the situation in the area known as Anamorava, lying on the Morava river valley.

Apart from Gnjilane/Gjilan town, Anamorava covers three other municipalities, namely, Kamenice, Novo Brdo and Viti/Vitina. The area is far more ethnically mixed than any other in Kosovo, about 30 per cent of the population being non-Albanian, including Serbs, Roma, Ashkali and Croats.

The Borovci Brothers brick factory, 15 km south-east of Gjilan, is another example of an ethnically mixed workforce.

Mustafe Borovci, the director, says the Gnjilane/Gjilan municipality retained an ethnically mixed staff as a condition of its purchase from the Kosovo Trust Agency, KTA, which the UN has charged with selling off Kosovo's socially-owned firms.

"Since 2002 when we won the bid to buy the factory, we have fulfilled the part of the agreement obliging us to employ equal numbers of Albanians and Serbs," Borovci said.

Borovci says he fired two non-Albanian staff since then, both Romas, but not for reasons related to their ethnic background. "They were not eager to work," he said.

"The main condition for employment in this factory, apart from being a good worker, is to agree not to discuss politics."

One of his youngest employees, Marko Markovic, 20, from the nearby village of Birivojce, said in two years of work in the factory he had encountered no problems from Albanian colleagues.

"We don't talk politics - we just talk about our everyday matters and tell jokes," Markovic said.

The language of communication between the workers is Serbian, which is rarely heard in towns in Kosovo these days.

Marko stressed that both sides freely agreed to use Serbian. "The Albanians don't mind using Serbian, as they know Serbian better than we know Albanian," he added.

Arsim Krasniqi, 31, an Albanian employee, agreed that cooperation had proved preferable to confrontation. "We can't ignore each other - that's a part of life," he said. "We have accepted that fact."

Nazim Qehaja, 50, admitted that the setup in the Gjilan brick factory was far from representative of inter-ethnic relations in the rest of Kosovo.

"If people in Drenica could see how we work here with Serbs, they would be surprised," he said, referring to the central region of Kosovo that has traditionally harbored rebel movements, including the Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA, which led the fight against Serb rule in the 1990s.

But in south-east Kosovo, apart from examples of mixed working environments, there are also villages comprising Serbs and Albanians who maintain social contact.

Pointing to his physical proximity to his Serbian neighbour, Ramush Latifi, 54, a driver from the village of Kmetovc, said, "You see this wall? This is the only thing separating my house from Stojko's - nothing else."

His neighbour, Stojko Totic, 74, a pensioner, said cordial relations between their two families dated back at least a hundred years.

"In our village, Serbs and Albanians always lived together with mutual respect," Totic said. "I don't know what it is like in other villages."

Ramush Latifi maintained that Stojko's 30 years of working experience in far away England had a lot to do with his ability to accept Albanian neighbours. "He became more western and doesn't care about politics," he said.

Latifi and Totic agreed also that Albanians in the Gjilan/Gnjilane area are more ready to co-exist with Serbs than Albanians elsewhere in Kosovo, largely because there was less killing in this region in the 1999 conflict, compared to other areas.

Stojko's nephew, Novica Stojkovic, 40, said local Serbs do not feel threatened by their Albanian village neighbors but by Albanian newcomers in the towns.

"We live peacefully here because we are all natives," he said. "Our families have known each other for hundreds of years. But among newcomers, feelings of hatred towards Serbs are more prominent."

The two-day wave of ethnic violence in Kosovo in March, which left 19 dead and more than 4,000 displaced, did not leave the Anamorava region untouched.

A villager from Kusce, who did not want to be identified, said at the height of the violence on March 17 he was attacked by an angry mob in Urosevac/Ferizaj and beaten up. His Albanian assailants appeared to be retaliating against an attack on Albanians in the northern town of Mitrovica, which occurred on the same day.

"It was the scariest moment in my life as when the riots happened I was stuck in a traffick jam in Urosevac and some Albanians recognised me as a Serb and attacked my car," said the 25-year-old.

According to the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe, OSCE, the March riots displaced about 200 Serbs in south-east Kosovo, and some 40 houses in the Gjilan/Gnjilane area were burned.

The return of displaced people in Kosovo, most of whom are Serbs, is a precondition for the opening of discussions on the final status of Kosovo, expected to begin in mid-2005.

But in the Anamorava region, most Serbs who have not already left Kosovo, seem to have accepted a future involving peaceful co-habitation with Albanian neighbours, whatever Kosovo's future status may be.

"No matter what the resolution of our final status is, we will just say 'Amen'," Stojko Totic said.

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