

The Mitrovica Syndrome

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The Mitrovica violence has raised serious questions about the international community's administration of Kosovo.

The barbed wire tumbling across the dusty bridge is a forlorn sight, and deeply depressing for anyone acquainted with the Balkans.

This is Mitrovica, the current flashpoint in Kosovo, but it looks just like hundreds of blockades erected by military forces in the region over the past decade: a few soldiers ambling about on either side, the haphazard array of obstacles, the lazy checking of occasional vehicles and pedestrians determined to pass.

The appearance may be mundane, but the meaning is always crystal clear: partition.

The recent series of violent incidents between Albanians and Serbs here has raised serious questions about the international community's administration of the territory.

With Albanians on the north side of the river fleeing south, the town has been left fully segregated, except for three apartment blocks protected by a half-dozen NATO tanks. "It is a completely multi-ethnic area," insisted the French commander, as I passed through the barbed wire barrier.

Mitrovica is at the heart of the challenges facing the UN and NATO in Kosovo now. As the largest remaining minority enclave, with several thousand Serbs who have come to this grim place from other parts of the province as well as from the south of the town, it is seen by Serbs as their last chance to sustain any meaningful community in Kosovo. It is also the base for militant forces almost certainly operating in some kind of cooperation with Serbia.

Up to 50,000 Serbs populate the wider area. "Partition is not pleasant. But if this place falls, all of these people will head north to Serbia," a Serbian journalist said.

Recognising the centrality of the issue, Lord Robertson, the British NATO secretary general, planned a walkabout in the troubled town on his visit with top NATO General Wesley Clark on the anniversary of the bombing campaign. At the last moment, the Mitrovica leg was aborted, and probably not for security reasons or any logistical problems official cited. A more likely reason is the Mitrovica offers nothing to commemorate, and a photo opportunity there could only advertise a fundamental failing at the heart of the Kosovo project.

But the problems go still beyond building some kind of common life between Albanians and Serbs. Even assuming the checkpoint on the bridge at Mitrovica stays for years, or worse that all Serbs leave Kosovo, the central problem of organising a stable and democratic society remains.

Keen to side-step the politically explosive question of the future sovereignty of Kosovo, the international community has put off the matter of a central Kosovo political administration. The West knows that the first act of any Albanian government in Pristina will be to call for formal independence from Serbia. The political inexperience, bitter internal rivalries, and influence of the former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) further recommended this approach.

But the result could be worse. To establish some kind of political accountability, the UN is now stressing local elections, projected for the autumn. As a result, the previous Albanian political structures are splintering, and almost every day a former KLA commander launches a new political party. This could be seen as the start of healthy democratic debate.

Except for Mitrovica. The lesson of that bridge is not just Albanian-Serbian mistrust. It is also the absence of basic security. Notably, the UN postponed two murder trials in the town - unconnected with the unrest - because it could not guarantee security for the witnesses, judges and other experts required.

In the north, I happened upon UN police arresting a Serb who, terribly drunken, had stabbed to death a guest at a Serbian wedding ceremony earlier in the day. My Serbian journalist colleague predicted that, unable to manage a legal case, the UN would only take him to the border and dump him onto Yugoslav authorities.

As Bernard Kouchner, the UN chief, has widely complained, contributing states have only provided half the roughly 6,000 police requested. Financial contributions are also desperately off pace for his administration's annual budget - which he says is equivalent to only the cost of half a day's NATO bombing.

While civilian head in Kosovo, Kouchner does not control the NATO forces, which themselves are subject to internal disagreements. Complicating matters still further, the main civilian bodies, the UN and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, are also subject to rivalries and disputes.

As a result, rule of law is a distant concept, and central government is effectively non-existent. Crucially, Kosovo has no constitution - some argue that such a document would contravene Yugoslav sovereignty or even UN Security Council Resolution 1244. As a result the competencies of local or any other levels of administration have yet to be defined. The UN and KFOR have tired of being asked the question of sovereignty every day: we are in charge here, they insist. But it may be in fact that no one really is.

Local elections, says one leading Kosovo Albanian analyst, thus risk giving democratic legitimacy to former warlords now establishing their own regional economic and political fiefdoms or "cartels". Open political debate, much less serious independent journalism, becomes simply too dangerous. "Money has entered politics, and if you criticise someone now, you are attacking their business," the analyst says.

The localised problems of Mitrovica, or of the breakaway KLA group fighting on the eastern border with Serbia, are therefore not the main problems themselves but only consequences of this fundamental lack of central authority.

Such a pessimistic view does collide with many fundamental accomplishments of the implementation so far. Building the peace is always a long-term and more challenging process. The refugees have returned, some basic civic institutions (license plates on cars and even insurance!) are emerging, and economic activity - even if mainly to serve the international circus - is nevertheless picking up.

And the process of real Kosovo Albanian politicking has begun. The problems are due in part to the previous decade of effective Yugoslav military occupation, which led to underground movements and irresponsible political posturing.

It may not look pretty now, but the legacy will take years to overcome. In a positive sign, at least a few voices now argue that the only way forward is to find some kind of accommodation with Serbs, and even with alternative political groups in Belgrade. The UN will point to the recent agreement to disband the

breakaway KLA group at Presevo - seen as a political success for Hashim Thaci, the former KLA leader, who helped broker the deal.

Kosovo was arguably an inevitable war, which risked dragging in the entire region. The international intervention, messy as it was, nevertheless limited the effects and removed that risk. Yugoslavia remains a basket-case, and conflict is very possible this year over its renegade second republic, Montenegro. But the prospect of a regional war no longer hangs over the southern Balkans.

This just leaves Mitrovica. The West has invested much in Kosovo, perhaps not always very wisely. But if those soldiers on the bridge are ever to go home, it must first, for a time, increase its authority and its expenditure here. That time is now.

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