

## **Wounds Need Time to Heal**

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Minorities in Kosovo are in prison, trapped in guarded enclaves and living in fear, but steps can be taken to break the cycle of revenge.

As a result of the NATO bombing and its aftermath, Kosovo has been cleansed of its minorities. One campaign of revenge has replaced another, and the challenge facing Kosovo now is to break that cycle.

Out of around 200,000 Serbs before the war, there are now only 90,000, according to official estimates. More than half of these are in north Mitrovica and the surrounding area, which means there are only around 40,000 in all the rest of the province. The intention of the Albanian majority is that even more should go - that Kosovo should become even cleaner.

In Pristina, the capital, there are less than 400 Serbs, living in three apartment blocks guarded by troops. KFOR has been trying to help them, because they cannot go out and buy bread, get medicines or even go to the hospital. They know they could be targeted.

A child of two or three can point the finger at you, and you may be killed without explanation.

The situation is especially bad for older people who do not speak English; even if they speak Albanian, they know that their accent will give them away. In the villages it is the same: guarded enclaves.

Serbs in Kosovo are therefore effectively in prison. With no ability to work, travel or imagine a future, they live in fear, and become increasingly radicalised. Even young people who had open minds and pure souls are desperate.

The situation is ripe for exploitation for radical political purposes - and not only on the Serb side. Albanian extremists benefit, too, pointing to the existence of radical Serbs to justify their own positions and activities.

This is why I oppose enclaves, and the policy in Mitrovica in particular. After NATO divided the town, Albanian and Serbian radicals ensured that their respective quarters were cleansed of members of the "other" community. Facing each other across the razor wire is a good way to ensure their respective positions of power. But it is no way to break the vicious circle of radicalism and revenge.

The war itself, and the situation we find ourselves in now, was not inevitable. I believe there could have been a way for the two communities to talk and reach an accommodation. I still believe the same could be achieved now. But this would require both sides to acknowledge their radical elements and work together to find solutions.

It would in the first place mean acknowledging the harm done to both sides. Albanians suffered many bad things in the past ten years. Terrible things happened during the bombing campaign, the worst imaginable. Some of us tried to help Albanians during those difficult days, hiding people and staying with them for protection.

But Serbs suffered in the ten years before that, when Kosovo had autonomy and Albanians held power

here. It was not the same as what the Serbs did, but we have to be able to talk about it. And now Albanians are taking their revenge again.

The polarisation between the two sides must be broken: Albanians as the victims and therefore all blameless, and Serbs as the perpetrators and therefore all guilty.

Serbs have to reconcile themselves to their responsibility, and identify individuals who are guilty of crimes. But Albanians have to do the same: recognise that they bear some responsibility for what happened, that some members of their community have committed crimes, and that not all Serbs are guilty. They have to be willing to make room for minorities.

This is unlikely to happen unless the international community cracks down seriously on radical Albanians, to stop the violence and intimidation. This is not just a matter of policing, but must also be done on a political level: most of the attacks and accusations are not random or isolated but part of an organised process.

For its part, the UN could also do much more to assure Serbs that they are treated equally, in the first place by simply talking to them more. Adequate representation for Serbs and other minorities in institutional bodies covering all areas of life must be ensured, special support should be given for the surviving minority villages, and as conditions allow a serious effort must be made to encourage the return of those who fled.

The UN could also play a special role in the delicate task of helping Kosovo Serbs structure a legitimate and healthy relationship with Serbia, perhaps in collaboration with nongovernmental organisations.

As to the political settlement and the question of sovereignty, it cannot be imposed but must be worked out between Albanians and Serbs here, and between the Albanians and Serbs in Belgrade, in an open and democratic way.

That implies that a solution for Kosovo does need democratic change in Belgrade and it is in the interests of Kosovo Albanians to understand and support this. We need to focus on the majority of issues on which we can agree, human rights, open society and normal life, before getting stuck on things about which we disagree.

Most of all Kosovo needs time. The international community will have to stay here, with troops, for a very long while. We need time to clean children's souls, and create an environment in which people can work and move about normally. Then we can start to talk about living together.

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**Location:** Serbia  
Kosovo

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**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/wounds-need-time-heal>