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# Doves and Hawks

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by [Siena Anstis](#)

24 June 2008

*A few groups are trying to bridge the ethnic chasm in Kosovo, but they face powerful enemies.*

VUSHTRII, Kosovo | Marina Savic is a tough-looking Serbian woman with a stout build, dark hair, and black eyes. She lives with six other Serbian families among an Albanian majority in Gjilan, in western Kosovo.

She had come to Vushtrii, a small town in the north, to volunteer in a community policing program.

"I face no pressure and I don't feel any kind of hatred. I feel like myself here and in Gjilan," said Savic, sitting among a group of Serbian, Albanian, and other minority volunteers at the Kosovo Police Service training center.

In the short term, the program will defuse garden-variety disagreements among neighbors. In the long term, it could be one of the warming trends that helps thaw what has become the frozen Kosovo conflict.

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*Community Building Mitrovica's projects include this center for women and children (above). The Ibar River divides Mitrovica ethnically and geographically (below). Photos by Siena Anstis.*

Such efforts will be multiethnic and they are likely to be led by people who suffered terrible losses in the armed conflict of the late 1990s. They face huge odds, not to mention fierce and at times dangerous resistance.

## THE TOUGHEST NUT

Nowhere, perhaps, is more divided than Mitrovica, the northern town split in two by ethnicity and the Ibar River. On the northern side, Serbs dominate. On the southern side, Albanians. The lone Albanian who ventures north will often carry a fake identity and speak English. Likewise, Serbs fear traveling into the southern area.



About 20,000 people, mostly Serbs, live north of the river. About 110,000, mostly Albanian, live south of it, according to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Valdete Idrizi and her mother own an apartment in northern Mitrovica that they have not set foot in since April 1999, when masked Serbian paramilitaries told them to get out. Today,

Idrizi said, a Serbian family lives there. "I never got a cent for my house. I lived there all my life, till 1999."

It's a difficult subject, but Idrizi, who lost family and friends during the Kosovo conflict, was determined not to become bitter. Instead, the same year she was driven from her home, she started a multiethnic organization, Community Building Mitrovica. Since then, it has become widely recognized – she won the U.S. State Department's International Women of Courage award in March.

Idrizi tries to get Kosovo's Serbs and Albanians to recognize their shared interests. She brings together multiethnic teams to fight for increased safety, better education and health care, and more jobs.

"The people in the north are interested in living in peace, having minority protection, having the possibility of employment and vacation," she said, noting that Kosovo's Albanians want the same things.

"About my optimism that there's a chance for peace -- in Kosovo, that's a big word, peace," Idrizi said with a rueful laugh. Over the years she has developed a different view of things than her mother, who continues to hope that they'll be able to move back to their former home. Idrizi said that though not impossible, reconciliation will not happen anytime soon.

Still, she continues her work, which has caused her to be beaten up and threatened and which became even more difficult after Kosovo's declaration of independence. Her Serbian staff still do their best to get to work even if they can no longer spend eight hours in southern Mitrovica.

Immediately after Kosovo's **17 February declaration of independence**, fearing an outbreak of violence, Idrizi shut down a center her group uses in northern Mitrovica for women and children. Despite the risks, the women who use the center insisted that it reopen, which it did without incident.

It's episodes like that, as well as a meeting two weeks ago that could lead to cooperation among a network of nearly 60 Albanian and Serbian community groups in Kosovo, that keep her going.

"Doves and Hawks"

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#### CRIME DOES PAY

Finding common ground, as Idrizi aims to do, is complicated by powerful forces that have an interest in keeping the communities apart. The Serbian area in the north is mainly administered by Belgrade and many residents receive salaries from Serbia.

Some blame gangs in northern Mitrovica who operate black market businesses and pressure the Serbs to refuse to cooperate with the Kosovo government and its institutions.


"Local north Mitrovica power-brokers use different means and approaches to hold on to their political influence, mainly peer pressure -- if you're collaborating then you risk being labeled a traitor -- and threats of physical violence, tough guys approaching you in the street and suggesting you don't mingle too much," said Filip Pavlovic, the Serbian director of Fractal, a Belgrade-based group that work on ethnic reconciliation in Kosovo and Serbia.

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Likewise, Ali Ahmeti, a young Albanian Kosovan who started a group called Peace Doves after losing cousins and a best friend during the 1999 NATO bombing campaign, said, "The Serbian people want to change the situation, but they don't know if they'll be defended from the [Serbian] radicals."

But it's not just threats and intimidation that keep the gangs and the black market going in northern Mitrovica. Ahmeti pointed out that illicit goods are usually cheaper, and Serbs in the north enjoy discount prices on products including gasoline.

Busting the black markets will take a huge effort: according to economist Muhamet Mustafa of the nonprofit Riinvest Institute for Development Research in Pristina, the black market economy is worth 30 to 40 percent of Kosovo's gross national product.

Fisnik Rexhepi, spokesman for Kosovo's Interior Ministry, said a "security gap" exists in Mitrovica, "which is used by criminal groups, Serbian and Albanian, for smuggling and creating a 'legal' black market." He said the ministry "views the problem in the northern part of Kosovo [as] not related to interethnic relations but ... to do with the rule of law."

Rexhepi points the finger at Belgrade, which "is not only offering salaries but it is also threatening those who work for Kosovo institutions," including members of the Kosovo Police Service. Threatened officers no longer officially operate under the KPS but they continue to be paid and to meet with their colleagues on an informal basis. "Many of them have expressed their willingness and readiness to return to their work place, despite the government in Belgrade and their political leaders in Kosovo," Rexhepi said.

### MAKING KOSOVO WORK

Even Albin Kurti, the young leader of Vetevendosje, or Self-Determination, an Albanian group that has long pushed for Kosovo's independence, thinks ethnic integration is possible with the right strategy and leaders.

Well-spoken and surprisingly mild-mannered for a protest leader, Kurti said that Kosovo's continued interethnic problems stem partly from the UN administration's lack of initiative and vision for economic development in Kosovo.

A 2008 World Bank report called Kosovo one of the poorest economies in Europe, with an annual per capita income of about 1,118 euros in 2006. Kosovo's unemployment rate is 45 percent.

By creating jobs and opening more workplaces, economic development could provide ways for a more natural kind of ethnic mingling to take place, Kurti said. "Integration is not automatic. You integrate because you have to."

Whatever their record on the economy, Kosovo's international minders have tried to ensure that it remains a multiethnic society.

The proposal for Kosovo's status unveiled last year by Finnish diplomat Martti Ahtisaari, which became the foundation for the new country's constitution, guarantees minority groups a certain number of seats in parliament and gives them an extra measure of power over legislation relating to minorities. Even Kosovo's national anthem, adopted earlier this month, has no lyrics, lest heroic verses offend some minority sensibilities.

Rexhepi said integration is further hampered by systematic attempts by Belgrade to destabilize Serbian regions of Kosovo.

"Senior officials from the government in Belgrade use their visits to the Republic of Kosovo to provoke and to pass misinformation that would inevitably lead to further instability and uncertainty," he said.

But Pavlovic, of Fractal, said the division in places like Mitrovica is hardly the invention of functionaries in Belgrade.

"The fact is that there is no special need to give incentives and to bribe the Serbian community [to not open a dialogue with Albanians], since ethnic division is real, authentic, and shared," he said. "Serbs in Mitrovica are clearly in the fear that under the umbrella of 'reintegration' or 'reunification' of the city's ethnic and demographic imbalance would lead to their new displacement and migration to Serbia."

Before the war, 30,000 Serbs lived in Pristina; now there are fewer than 100.

To allay such fears, Idrizi said politicians need to take concrete steps. She has suggested that Mitrovica politicians organize transport for Serbs and Albanians to their respective cemeteries, which are located on opposite sides of the river from their communities, or that they lead cleanups of the other community's graveyard in a show of respect and empathy.

During a late May conference in Pristina, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Knut Vollebaek said of Kosovo's ethnic divide, "Sadly, we seem to accept that this is how it always was and, thus, will always be."

Vollebaek clearly was not speaking for people like Savic, the Serbian woman in the community policing program. She knows that this is not how it always was.

"My diploma from high school is in Albanian and in Serbian -- proof that we used to live together," she said.

