

Kosovo Uncertainty Before the Storm

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There is growing uncertainty and tension among the inhabitants of the Serb-populated northern part of Mitrovica as they wait for the outcome of two years of negotiations to settle Un-administered Kosovo's long-term status. With the last round of talks ending in failure on Nov. 28, the stage is now set for Kosovo's Albanians to declare independence, once the United Nations-mediated diplomatic process formally ends on Dec. 10.

The most influential Serb leaders in the divided town—known to Serbs as Kosovska Mitrovica—decided on Nov. 28 that if the Kosovo Albanians were to go ahead with proclaiming their independence from Serbia, they would, in turn, declare their independence from the rest of Kosovo.

The Serbian National Council, S.N.V., said that Serbs would respond to a unilateral decision on independence by Kosovo's Albanian-dominated assembly by forming their own authorities in municipalities where they have a majority, in accordance with the laws of the Republic of Serbia.

The Serb community leaders also warned that they would intensify their campaign of civil disobedience.

"To each such decision by Albanians we will respond with our own decision on boycotting Kosovo's institutions, in agreement with our [Serbian] state and our institutions," said Milan Ivanovic, the S.N.V.'s leader.

A more militant note was sounded by a group of young men, with crew cuts, as they were having a drink in a café, looking attentively toward the bridge over the river Ibar, which divides this part of Mitrovica from the southern, Albanian-inhabited quarters.

"We are ready to respond to each Albanian attack from the southern part of the town by force. However, we do not expect any large-scale armed incidents," said Dejan, one of the young men in the Mitrovica café, supported by his friends.

The scene of fierce clashes between Serbs and Albanians on several occasions since the end of the Kosovo war in 1999 that left Mitrovica divided, the bridge has been watched over by Serbs intent on keeping the Albanians out of the north.

The role of these self-proclaimed "guardians of the bridge" has more recently been unofficially taken over by the Civil Guard, set up in northern Mitrovica with the declared purpose of dealing with natural disasters. However, one of the 30 officially unarmed members of the guard has told Balkan Insight that their real assignment is to watch over the bridge.

A well-placed source in northern Mitrovica's 25,000-strong Serb community says that Serbs in this part of

Kosovo have no difficulties in organizing themselves into a force or acquiring weapons.

"Large quantities of weapons have remained in people's possession after the war of 1998-99, when the state of Serbia was arming us," he told Balkan Insight.

Although Serbian forces—and the Belgrade administration—were pulled out of Kosovo after Serbia's defeat by NATO's air strikes to stop the crackdown on Kosovo's majority Albanians, there are plenty of arms held privately on both sides of the ethnic divide. It is part of the tradition that each household has its own rifle.

In this part of Mitrovica visitors feel as if they were in any small town in Serbia proper. Except for the presence of NATO-led peacekeepers, there is nothing to indicate that only a few hundred meters away there is a majority Albanian population impatiently waiting for Dec. 10, the end of the diplomatic process and the promised independence.

The only visible presence of the Pristina authorities in northern Mitrovica is the Kosovo police service. On the other hand, Belgrade has retained control of the majority of services such as the post office, telecom, the electricity grid, education, and health care. Other institutions also operate, including the Serbian Ministry of the Interior, which issues driving licenses and car registration documents in line with official regulations in Serbia proper.

According to estimates by the European Stability Initiative think tank, around 60 percent of those employed in northern Kosovo directly depend for their livelihoods on Serbia's budget.

The majority of Serbs in northern Kosovo are loyal to Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica and his conservative Democratic Party of Serbia, and admit that their every move is guided by, or coordinated with, the Belgrade government.

Djordje Lakusic, one of the leaders of the S.N.V., told Balkan Insight that "only the institutions of the Belgrade government matter here; official Pristina represents nothing to us."

In the meantime the Serbian government has reiterated that it will not accept Kosovo's independence, which it would regard as the amputation of part of its territory, and has warned it will take unspecified retaliatory measures if independence is proclaimed. However, it has ruled out military action.

Oliver Ivanovic, a representative of the moderate Serbian List for Kosovo—and fierce opponent of the S.N.V.—told Balkan Insight that the Albanians themselves had given up on northern Kosovo, which was why armed incidents should not be expected.

"That has been resolved a long time ago. The Albanians are aware that they have no authority over northern Kosovo, and they won't invest any serious effort in trying to acquire it."

However, northern Mitrovica's young people remain cautious, and carefully listen to signals from Belgrade, although they themselves do not believe Albanians would try to establish control over the whole town by force.

French soldiers from the NATO-led KFOR peacekeeping contingent do not seem concerned either. They are patrolling the town, sitting in cafes and awaiting orders from their command.

To rumors that NATO is bringing in reinforcements to the border between Kosovo and Serbia proper, the young men of northern Mitrovica respond with only a shrug. "They should do it between us and them, across the bridge," one of them said.

With the end of the Kosovo status process now imminent, most Serbs have resigned themselves to the prospect of Kosovo going its own way.

Oliver Ivanovic said that he expected the Albanians to proclaim Kosovo's independence in March next year, a move that would only accelerate the S.N.V.'s plan to go ahead with the north's more formal separation from the rest of Kosovo. He thinks that such a policy is dangerous for Serbs in Kosovo.

"The S.N.V.'s announcements on secession from Kosovo do not mean anything. Northern Kosovo is already, de facto, not a part of the province. However, their announcement can endanger Serbs living in other parts of Kosovo," Oliver Ivanovic said referring to those Serbs who live in smaller, more vulnerable communities, scattered around Kosovo.

"The S.N.V. does not care about what will happen to those people in independent Kosovo, no one thinks about them," he said.

Political analyst Dragan Bujosevic argues that armed conflicts would not suit either side. He believes that in case of such a confrontation, Serbs would be "total losers." In any case, he says that the United States will not allow the Albanian majority "to do something stupid now and attack northern Kosovo."

However, Bujosevic, a journalist with the Belgrade weekly, NIN, thinks that extremists among the majority population have a longer-term plan. "The Albanians have patiently cleansed Kosovo of Serbs, and they have a similar strategy for northern Mitrovica as well," Bujosevic told Balkan Insight.

Oliver Ivanovic is less concerned about such developments. He thinks that the Albanians gave up northern Kosovo a long time ago, and that KFOR and the international community will not allow armed incidents.

"Everyone knows that any attempt at seizing northern Kosovo by force could lead to serious trouble," he says.

Oliver Ivanovic represents a minority among Serbs, and many of his fellow-Serbs in northern Mitrovica see their future in a more alarming light. "We won't allow the Albanians to drive us out of our homes. We will fight force by force," journalist Miodrag Radomirovic says.

Kosovo's Serbs will be waiting anxiously in the coming weeks to see how Kosovo's Albanians set about their independence and how Belgrade responds. The people of northern Mitrovica remain worried: but their fate looks less uncertain than that of fellow-Serbs in the rest of Kosovo.

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