

TIME

Divided They Stand. Kosovo Seems Headed For Independence, But Serbs And Albanians Are Still At Odds Over Their Future

Vivienne Walt, Dejan Anastasijevic Time International

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Walking across the bridge over the Ibar River, which links the Albanian south side to the Serbian north side of the Kosovar town of Mitrovica, is like crossing an international border. NATO sentries guard each end of the span, the local currency switches from euros to Serb dinars, and the script on signposts shifts from Latin to Cyrillic. On the Albanian side, slogans on buildings call for Kosovo's independence, while a banner hung prominently on the Serb side proclaims the region as Serbia's legal domain. Both sides honor their war heroes: Albanian neighborhoods are adorned with pictures of Ramush Haradinaj, the former Kosovar Prime Minister who is awaiting trial in the Hague for atrocities against Serb and Roma civilians, while Serb store windows flaunt posters honoring ultranationalist politician Vojislav Seselj, on trial at the same war-crimes tribunal for his role in the murder of Bosnian and Croatian civilians during the 1991-99 Yugoslav wars.

A visitor arriving in a vehicle bearing Kosovar license plates prudently parks on the Albanian side of town, for fear of provoking Serbs.

Like Mitrovica, the entire province of Kosovo is caught between two masters: Serbia, which lays claim to the landscape Serbs regard as the birthplace of their nation, and the majority Albanian population, dreaming of a country of their own. Six years have passed since a U.S.-led NATO bombing campaign drove Serbia's forces from Kosovo and ended their campaign of ethnic cleansing, but the tug-of-war for Kosovo is not over yet. After a bitter standoff under NATO control, the two communities could soon find themselves fellow citizens of a new nation. U.N.-sponsored talks on the future of the province are expected to start by year's end. The negotiations--over minority rights, a free-market economy and an impartial legal system--will be enormously contentious, but the outcome is virtually assured: independence, perhaps as soon as the end of next year. Is Kosovo ready?

Since fighting ended in 1999, NATO troops have patrolled the hilly roads and towns in armored vehicles, guns at the ready, to prevent renewed clashes between the province's 1.7 million Albanians and the 130,000 Serbs who stayed put despite losing the war. But the tension endures. "We have tolerance, but not much more than that," says Larry Rossin, a former U.S. diplomat who is now deputy head of the U.N. Mission in Kosovo. A new group of Albanians calling itself the Army for the Independence of Kosovo has set up roadblocks and shot at several Serb police vehicles, issuing threats against anyone who stands in the way of independence. In Belgrade, the Serb parliament last week ruled out that possibility. Coexistence--not to mention reconciliation--will be tough.

Oliver Ivanovic, one of the province's few Serb politicians, knows just how hard the task will be. Sipping coffee in his Mitrovica neighborhood, he recalls the day his son Janko asked, "Daddy, will you show me a real live Albanian?" Almost 90% of Kosovo's 1.9 million population are ethnic Albanians. Yet at 12, Janko has never met one--a measure of the chasm that separates the two communities. "My son has the impression that Albanians are so evil, they must have horns," says Ivanovic, 52. To the 15,000 Serbs in Mitrovica, he says, an independent Kosovo is unthinkable. "No way. This is our whole identity."

Ivanovic has spent almost his entire life in the town, working as a top karate coach before becoming a manager of Kosovo's lead-smelting plant. His fluency in English made him a natural head of the small Serb delegation in the U.N.-created Kosovo Assembly. The job has become increasingly hazardous, pitting him against Albanian politicians and officials in Belgrade, who have ordered Serbs to boycott a parliament that they believe already gives Kosovo a veneer of statehood. When Ivanovic's car was blown up in February, he immediately suspected local Serbs who consider him a traitor. Now he travels to the Assembly in bulletproof U.N. vehicles guarded by Polish soldiers.

There Ivanovic discreetly meets Albanian politicians to discuss Kosovo's future; he sees dialogue as the way to heal ethnic divisions. "The political tension is killing the Serbs," he says. He remains unyielding on independence, however: he wants Serbia to annex three Serb-populated municipalities in northern Kosovo that comprise 15% of the province. But Western diplomats and Albanians have already rejected that proposal as unworkable, since many Kosovo Serbs do not even live in the north. If the province does gain statehood--and Ivanovic is resigned to the fact that it will--he says a mass of Serbs will leave, joining 100,000 exiles who fled to Serbia in 1999. "If they don't leave," he says, "there will be more killings."

The possibility of fresh bloodshed has risen since March 2004, when Albanian riots across the province destroyed Serb churches and houses, leaving 19 people dead. Yet the Albanians, though united in desire for their own state, are divided politically. They have not settled on a successor to President Ibrahim Rugova, who is severely weakened by lung cancer. "Each person wants to be the one to lead his country to independence," says Verena Knaus, senior analyst on Kosovo for the European Stability Initiative, a Berlin-based policy group. The main contenders, from strikingly different backgrounds, are Nexhat Daci, a longtime official in Rugova's centrist party; Hashim Thaci, a former guerrilla leader who now runs Kosovo's second largest party; and Haradinaj, another

former guerrilla, who hopes to be acquitted at his war-crimes trial and re-enter politics.

One of the fiercest partisans, though, is Albin Kurti, whose protest group, the Self-Determination Movement, flourishes on a strong anti-Serb message. His campaign for a unilateral declaration of independence has attracted a network of 8,000 members in 16 branches around the province. If Serbia attempts to block independence or reclaim Kosovo, "there will be a great willingness and readiness of people to fight again," he says. "People are tired of war, but people are even more tired of fake peace."

One recent afternoon in the western town of Decani, Kurti spoke to a combat-hardened group of 12 veterans from the defunct Kosovo Liberation Army, the guerrilla force that fought Serb soldiers in the nearby villages and forested mountains. Clustered in a small room, men with battle-scarred faces squeezed around a table, hanging on Kurti's words. "There is corruption. The state-run factories are being destroyed," said the tall, lean activist in black-rimmed glasses, his fist punching the air. "It is time to channel dissatisfaction into political action." The group listened to Kurti because his bravery has earned their admiration. In 1997, he organized illegal mass protests in Kosovo's capital, Pristina, under the noses of the Serb security police. As NATO bombs fell in 1999, he was arrested and sentenced to 15 years for political terrorism. He served more than 2 1/2 years in Serb prisons, where he says he endured torture and beatings.

As the diplomatic wrangling over Kosovo's status revs up, Kurti's message has grown more vociferous: he wants Albanians to reject any U.N. negotiations with Serbia, since he is convinced Belgrade "has plans to take over Kosovo again." In June, Kurti's group began stenciling Pristina's walls with a simple motto: "Jo negociata, vetevendosje!" (No negotiations, self-determination!) The phrase now appears on hundreds of walls in almost every corner of Kosovo. Kurti shrugs off critics, saying that a deal with Serbia "would mean a solution that is not in the will of the people."

But most Kosovo Albanians are eager to start independence talks. Cafe workers, postal clerks and homemakers in Pristina say they are willing to put their faith in Western diplomats to deliver their freedom. Pristina publicly proclaims Albanian gratitude for the role the U.S. played in ending Serb rule six years ago. The road leading downtown from the airport has been renamed Bill Clinton Boulevard, and a sprawling apartment complex displays a giant mural of the former U.S. President, smiling and waving. Even if Ivanovic and Kurti have tapped into the fear and fury of their constituents, young Albanians in the capital seem ready to move on. Many of those who es-

caped to be educated abroad have filtered home, and the go-getters represent a rich vein of talent for a new nation. "The possibilities are endless," says Petrit Selimi, a 26-year-old who has come back to help build the country after spending seven years in Oslo. Selimi says he hopes to enter politics in an independent Kosovo one day. Meanwhile, he darts between appointments with business clients and advertisers, appears on TV talk shows, and dines with Western diplomats who are intrigued by his modern views.

Selimi began his political career in 1993, when he was 14. He founded a youth organization called the Postpessimists, which brought together Serb and Albanian teenagers to discuss their joint future at a time when conflict between their communities was heating up. Selimi's slight build and guileless blue eyes seem slightly incongruous for a man with such political smarts and a gift for translating big ideas into concrete action. At 17, when Serbia banned the Albanian curriculum, he went to Norway to complete high school and earn a university degree in urban planning, before returning last year to his hometown of Pristina. He quickly started political and commercial projects aimed at transforming Kosovo into a prosperous, multiethnic nation. He is now working with several internationally funded nonprofit organizations and educational institutions, including a technical academy to train young computer engineers. "We could be like Bangalore in India," he says, "with all our returnees starting high-tech companies."

Now that status talks are about to begin, Selimi has been meeting discreetly with like-minded Serbs in Belgrade in a quiet campaign to prevent their politicians from obstructing an independence deal. He plans to publish position papers with practical solutions to contentious issues, including property claims, minority rights and the return of Serb refugees. In July, Selimi was named CEO of a new Pristina newspaper Express, which was dreamed up by investors and journalists on the patio of Strip Depot cafe, which he owns. The hard-hitting tabloid is dedicated to investigating government corruption and organized crime, and it is already a must-read for many politicians. The paper's influence could well grow when Selimi begins publishing a weekly Serbian-language edition pitched directly at Kosovo Serbs. He hopes the newspaper will help create a sense of belonging that will encourage them to remain a part of an independent Kosovo. "Right now the Serbs are reading Belgrade papers," he says, "propaganda that tells them to leave."

To Albanians like Selimi, Kurti's protests seem another futile relic of the past. Instead, Selimi says, people should be planning practical steps to create a new independent nation open to all communities. Maybe then, Oliver Ivanovic's son Janko will finally meet a real-live Albanian.