

Conflict Studies Research Centre



**Kosovo March 2004
The Endgame Begins**

James Pettifer

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Key Points

- The March disturbances mark an important landmark, and the process of deciding final status has probably begun
- The main causes were the long term crisis in Mitrovica, practical failures by the International Community and very high numbers of alienated jobless youth
- Religion is playing a greater role in Balkan affairs
- There is a danger of the growth of both Orthodox and Islamic extremism
- Media coverage of Balkan affairs is thought locally to have a pro-Serb bias

The March violence in Kosovo was unexpected but its causes lie deep in the unresolved future of Kosovo and complacency and lack of attention by the International Community. The disturbances indicate the process of deciding the final status of Kosovo has started, and although the International Community has indicated that it will not change its existing Kosovo policies, they are likely to come under increasing pressure as events this summer develop.

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The violent disturbances that occurred in the third week of March in Kosovo have restored the attention of the international community to Kosovo, and brought this Balkan region into the news in a major way for the first time for three years. After a period of calm and relative success in transferring powers from the United Nations to the local institutions in 2002-2003, as prescribed by UN resolution 1244, and in the development of the police and the Kosovo Protection Corps, Mitrovica was affected by widespread violence on 17 March, and in the following days there were attacks on Serb properties and religious institutions. Outside Kosovo, there were reciprocal attacks on mosques in Belgrade and elsewhere in Serbia and Bosnia. The reaction of the international community (IC) has been to emphasise the need for more rapid and effective implementation of the 'Standards before Status' policy, but to reject suggestions that major policy changes are necessary.

The Background to the Events

In essence, three parallel factors came together to produce the chaos in Kosovo in the week starting 16 March. The first was contemporary, and contingent, caused by the widespread imposition of roadblocks in Serb areas in central Kosovo following a violent incident in which a youth died. The Serb roadblocks were effective at stopping traffic on the main north-south arterial road, and the Serbs appeared to be able to behave with impunity in relation to the UNMIK police and local (ethnic Albanian dominated) police.

Secondly, in the north Kosovo town of Mitrovica, ethnic Albanian children were drowned in a flooded river. Although independent eye witness reports are lacking, it has been claimed on the Albanian side that the children were forced into the water by a crowd of Serbian youths with dogs. There are reliable eyewitness reports indicating that someone with an AK-47 opened fire into the Albanian crowd, and ethnic Albanians replied with handguns. Ethnic Albanians believe that ex-paramilitary supporters of Arkan and similar ultranationalist Serbs have begun moving from traditional centres of support like Vranje and Kursumlija into Leposavic opstina north of Mitrovica, and they played a part in increasing the tensions on the Serb side, but there is no independent corroboration of these claims.

The third factor, and much the most important, was the collapse of UN control of northern Mitrovica, so that the only way Albanian demonstrators could be stopped from sweeping over the bridge and confronting Serbs there was by highly coercive methods of riot control from UNMIK special police units and KFOR. The seriousness of the situation was such that Serbian army units were mobilised ready to enter Kosovo, and a clash with the IC forces could have occurred if the violence had spread north towards Serbia. The UN abandoned its positions and was replaced by KFOR on 18 March and 19 March.

As a result of the defence of northern Mitrovica and Leposavic opstina by the IC forces, angry Albanian crowds attacked Serbian homes and churches, some in or near Mitrovica, others in Prishtina, and in other cases as far away as Prizren. After these reciprocal attacks, and the displacement of approximately 3000 Serbs from their homes, the violence died down. The arrival of new KFOR forces and IC police undoubtedly hastened this process, but was not central to it in most places. Some Serbs have returned to their homes, others are in IDP camps, while others appear unlikely to be able to return to their homes in the foreseeable future.

Street Dynamics

The nature of the above events is familiar to students of inter-ethnic conflict in the Balkans and elsewhere. A series of random incidents links into a chain of causation that leads to a climate where street violence easily erupts, and patterns of 'tit for tat' revenge develop far from the original incidents. The large number of alienated jobless young people is a main factor in the scale and rapid spread of the protests. In Kosovo the key factor was that seminal events occurred in the divided town of Mitrovica, where since 1999 Serbian parallel structures generally thought in the IC to be ultimately controlled from Belgrade have been allowed to develop, and where in both the Albanian community in south Mitrovica and Serb northern Mitrovica there is very high unemployment and deprivation, and little or none of the economic and social progress that has occurred in places like Peje (Pec), Ferizaj (Urosevac), Vushtrri and Gjilan. Mitrovica has a long tradition of militancy of all kinds, going back to the mass strikes and Trepce mine occupations against Milosevic's 'Greater Serbia' project in the late 1980s and the loss of thousands of ethnic Albanian jobs. In some senses, the Kosovo Democratic League of Dr Ibrahim Rugova was born out of these events, and the de facto division of the city has been a running sore in IC-ethnic Albanian relations.

The foundation of the scale of the March crisis lies in the fact that since July 1999, northern Mitrovica has never been under clear United Nations authority. French KFOR for long periods created a climate of impunity for Serb parallel structures (the 'bridgewarter' problem), United Nations staff have not stood out unequivocally against the manipulation of these structures from Belgrade, and Serbs alleged by the Albanian side to be guilty of war crimes have been living in Mitrovica and its vicinity without disturbance. IC staff who have attempted to take a principled stand against these tendencies in IC organisations have been marginalized or removed from Mitrovica to other jobs, as in the case of key US police personnel in 2001-2002. As a result of the Iraq crisis, there are now no American administrators in top regional UN positions in Kosovo.

Wider Issues

The progress on some of the 'Standards' issues in the last year within Kosovo diverted the attention of the IC from the fact that on many fundamental issues the United Nations and KFOR have failed in delivering on their mandates. In the field of practical life, the very slow progress in restoring a reliable electricity supply has been a major source of popular dissatisfaction, as has the large sums of money from donors that appear to be soaked up by the UN and KFOR in administration and foreign salaries and projects that do not address the fundamental problems of poverty, unemployment and lack of development. KFOR often appears to Albanians to be focussed against the independence aspirations of virtually all Albanians, and

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has within it a plethora of national components with different command and control structures and different priorities, implying different political agendas for the future of Kosovo.

A very high level of electronic and other surveillance is maintained against targeted sections of the Albanian leadership that is justified in terms of the campaigns against organised crime but, as its existence is widely known, also breeds a climate of suspicion and alienation from the IC in general. Most Albanian leaders believe that the legal system using international judges and personnel is not independent, and subject to IC political pressures to imprison as many ex-KLA leaders as possible and to protect Kosovo Democratic League and Serbian interests. The low quality of the justice in important trials involving ex-KLA leaders such Remi in Podujeve and Drini in Prizren bears out these fears. A retrial has recently been ordered in the Drini case.

In the economic field, small businesses complain about the growth of red tape and bureaucracy. There has been very slow progress on the key issue of privatisation, and as a result industries with real potential such as agriculture and mining have not received any new investment. Income levels for those in work are low, and the use of the Euro as currency means many prices of imported goods are high, and there is little margin in most family budgets for savings or investment. Crime is encouraged in these circumstances. The unresolved political status of Kosovo means that funding for major infrastructure investment from the World Bank and similar institutions is not in practice available. The key industry of agriculture continues to stagnate. If it was revitalised and local food production increased, it could improve the standard of living far more than any other single measure.

The policies of the Bush administration sometimes seem to Kosovans to be guided more by the desire to do something different (preferably opposite) to what the Clinton administration would have done in the situation rather than by an objective evaluation of the Kosovo issues involved, or long term US geostrategic interests. Some policy decisions appear to be dominated by the policy coordination and implementation agency, the National Security Council, rather than the major policy-decision departments.

Regional Perspectives

In Serbia, there has been a growing realisation that a decision on the future of Kosovo is looming, and with a 'Standards' conference projected for summer 2005, there was every reason to begin a definition of territory in Kosovo that might remain at least culturally 'Serbian'. The IC 'hidden agenda' in top UN circles, to try to nurse Kosovo back to Serbia and prevent independence after the fall of Milosevic in autumn 2000, has failed in a decisive way in 2003. On the Albanian side, at rank and file level there was an equal motive to resist the growing number of Serbian refugee returns, in case they were a bargaining chip in terms of territorial/cantonal claims at a future political status conference. Thus a dynamic exists where the multicultural and secular objectives of the IC for a future Kosovo have not been endorsed by significant numbers of the 95% ethnic Albanian majority, or the 4% Serb minority.

The policies of the UN have led to problems for responsible leaders in both ethnic groups. On the Serb side many initiatives have passed to popular level, in the absence of leaders in the Kosovo Serb community of real status and general

influence, and on the Albanian side by the sense that the Serb minority is continually treated as a specially privileged group by the IC authorities. On a numerical basis it is greatly over-represented in the Kosovo Parliament and in many other institutions. The practical authority of the Parliament and the ethnic Albanian leaders was significantly reduced in the March crisis by the fact that the UN and KFOR have reserved all powers in the field of security and policing and justice, and this has left the Albanian political leaders with declining credibility on these issues at street level.

The Media Factor

Although the Albanians had a deservedly bad press for the attacks on churches after 17 March, many IC security analysts read the March events as a step forward for them.¹ All that really matters for the long term interests on the Albanian side is that the international silence on the issue of the future has been broken. Most major media organisations had no correspondents in the region when the disorder began, and missed the violence of the IC forces' attacks on numerous and threatening but generally unarmed Albanian demonstrators in Mitrovica on the first day, an event that is likely to hold long term significance in the Albanian community akin to that of 'Bloody Sunday' in Northern Ireland affairs. Instead the focus was on the Albanian response later in the week. Many people in Kosovo believe that there is an inbuilt pro-Serb bias in Western media reporting.² The problem on the Serbian side is that although the church attacks and interviews with refugees gave bad publicity to the Albanian majority, they also reinforced the perception that under current IC rule, there is not much prospect of a functional multicultural society and that therefore a de facto Albanian state is inevitable.

The violence has shown that the current status quo is not viable, as many urgent and non-controversial issues cannot be progressed, particularly in the field of the economy, as long as the political status of Kosovo is unclear. This has been recognised now by key figures in the IC who had previously had reservations about Kosovan independence, such as Clinton administration Balkan envoy Richard Holbrooke.

Religion

The numerous 'tit for tat' attacks on religious buildings across the whole Balkans in the middle of the conflict week should give rise to great concern in the IC. Mosques were attacked by mobs and suffered serious damage in Bosnia, and in Serbian towns like Nis. The Moslem religious school in Belgrade was completely destroyed. Secular and religious buildings were attacked in Voivodina. Churches were vandalised in Former Yugoslav Macedonia, Sandjak and elsewhere. Much of this was only marginally reported on key international channels.

¹ See, for instance recent material from the US-based STRATFOR organisation.

² There has been a long history of difficult relations between the IC and the local media in Kosovo. The IC see the Kosovo Albanian media as feeding nationalist views, while the local media see the IC as trying to impose artificially high standards on them. Many international networks, such as the BBC, continue to organise regional coverage from Belgrade, something which often gives rise to concern among the Kosovo Albanian majority.

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Again Serbia won the propaganda war here, in that leading IC figures immediately visited the burnt Serbian religious buildings in Kosovo, but have not commented in substance on the attacks on mosques in Serbia itself, let alone visited the scene. The behaviour of leading IC figures like Patten and Solana and the initial remarks of the NATO Secretary General are likely to reinforce Balkan Moslem fears that in any future Balkan conflicts, in the post 9-11 atmosphere, the Serbs, as Christians, will have a position of some impunity, reproducing aspects of the 1991-1994 period.

The March events should give an alarm call to the IC that if Islamic radicalism and Orthodox fundamentalism are entering the political discourse in the region, they will be very hard to control and attacks on religious institutions will have a transnational significance. An incident in one country produces a contrary reaction elsewhere in completely unpredictable ways. There is significant local anecdotal evidence that Islamic extremists are taking a greater interest in the region than in the immediate past, and Orthodox fundamentalists are active in Greece and Former Yugoslav Macedonia, sometimes in alliance with the local and IC security apparatuses. The Kosovo events show that this is not clearly understood. Even a small incident could produce major and farreaching consequences.

The Immediate Future

The IC has brought forward a plan to accelerate the Standards/Status issues, and has given a message that it is 'business as usual' in political terms. This was to be expected as any other policy would appear to be giving way to the pressure of street violence. It remains to be seen, though, whether the political status/independence issue can really be postponed much longer without further encouraging extremism on both sides. The cantonal proposals from Belgrade can be criticised from many viewpoints but do indicate a degree of realism about the practical situation on the ground. It appears to many observers that neither community wishes to live in a society with multiculturalism as an IC-imposed iconic policy objective, if that means political and legal uncertainties, and the neglect of the economy, in particular.

The slow response by the IC to the cantonisation issue may be bound up with the fact that in terms of internal Kosovo Albanian politics, it is a much harder issue for the Kosova Democratic League (LDK) of Ibrahim Rugova to handle than the ex-KLA parties of Hashim Thaci and Ramush Haradinaj. The LDK was born in northern Kosovo and many of the most important LDK families come from the north, whereas the central political base of Thaci's PDK party lies in central Kosovo and Haradinaj's AAK party in the west. Although neither of the latter leaders would welcome cantonisation, they would in practice be significantly less affected by it than the LDK, the favoured party of many European politicians.

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