

## Kosovo's Serbs in suspension

By Ginanne Brownell,  
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Jovica Simic and Nazimi Mehmeti are the kind of neighbours that members of the international community in Kosovo want you to meet. The two men grew up together in the nondescript village of Konjuh, a twenty-minute drive from Pristina that can be accessed only via a bumpy dirt road. Both Simic, 57, and Mehmeti, 63, worked in factories before the 1999 war in which Nato forces succeeded in driving the Serbian military out of Kosovo. Their lives are certainly not extraordinary except for one thing - Simic is a Kosovar Serb while Mehmeti is Kosovar Albanian. The lifelong neighbours are also friends something that is very rare [1] in Kosovo these days.

Simic fled the village immediately after the war to live in the majority Kosovo Serb enclave of Gracanica, but later returned to live in his rebuilt house. "I came back to live here because this is my house and my village", Simic says as he stands outside his brick two-storey house. "It was not a difficult decision to take because nothing bad ever happened between us." While the refurbishment of his house continues, many of his old neighbours have welcomed him to their own homes for coffee and cigarettes. "It is normal for him to come stay at my house and receive my welcome", Mehmeti says, dragging on a cigarette and huddling close to Simic to block out the winter cold. "He would receive much more of a welcome here than in Serbia where they would not like him."

Mehmeti (who speaks with Simic in Serbian) may be exaggerating, but there is a feeling among Kosovo Serbs that they are seen as second-class citizens, both in Kosovo and in Serbia. Many Kosovo Serbs in the divided town of Mitrovica say that people in Serbia - strangers and family-members alike - have referred to them as "Shiptars", a derogatory term for Albanians. Many Serbs who live in this city, as well as the northern municipalities that extend up to the border - or municipal boundary as it is called in politically correct international circles - have not dared venture south of the Ibar river into majority Kosovo Albanian areas for years for fear of violence against them.

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Also by Ginanne Brownell in **openDemocracy**:

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An estimated 130,000 Serbs fled Kosovo since the 1999 war, but around 100,000 remain - and the bitter dispute [2] between Belgrade and Pristina over sovereignty leaves many Kosovo Serbs feeling like pawns [3] used by both sides yet which neither really wants anything to do with. Oliver Ivanovic, a prominent Kosovo Serb politician (who was a member of the Kosovo assembly until the elections on 17 November), says that he feels the Kosovo Serbs are in a lose-lose situation regardless of what happens in Kosovo. "Neither Belgrade nor Pristina nor the international community is really concerned for the Kosovo Serbs", he says. "Unfortunately nobody seems to realise that we are the other side of the coin, and that for good or bad K-Serbs are really needed for anyone who wants to fix the problem."

## One reality, many perspectives

On 10 December 2007, the date designated by the United Nations Security Council for agreement on the final constitutional status of this breakaway province of Serbia expires [4]. In the absence of any consensus, the international debates over what will happen if Kosovo gets independence - as the Kosovar Albanians who form 90% of the population want - have continued until deadline-day [5].

Some states (including several in the European Union [7], as well as Russia [8]) say that independence will create a precedent and could set off a domino-effect [9] for many regions whose people are unhappy at being ruled from a political centre they have come to perceive as alien.

Serbia itself argues that Kosovo is both the "cradle" of its history as an Orthodox nation, as well as its legitimate [10] sovereign territory representing 15% of its land-mass.

Kosovar Albanians say that they have effectively been independent since 1999 - though a United Nations mission has been administering everything from education to the police force since the war ended - and refuse to consider any other solution [11].

Many Kosovo Serbs say that if independence is declared (and the newly elected prime minister Hashim Thaci [12] has said he will declare independence regardless of what the Security Council says - though the timing [13] of such a move is uncertain) they will leave Kosovo for good. If that happens, says north-Mitrovica-based journalist Igor Milic, 60%-70% of the Kosovo Serbs would leave Kosovo - and thus join the tens of thousands who moved north in 1999 and after.

The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR [14]) has made contingency plans in case this does happen, though its Kosovo office chief-of-mission Martin Loftus doubts that there will be an exodus on such a scale. "Yes, this is the Balkans, there could be incidents and people could be scared", he says. "But I tend to agree with Martti Ahtisaari [15] [the United Nations special envoy to Kosovo] when he stated he doubted people would move who have not moved already, and his plan would improve their lives and give more authority to them."

## Between Belgrade and Pristina

Hashim Thaci's language [16] towards the Kosovo Serbs has been emollient; he claims that he will give the Kosovo Serbs equal consideration once independence comes [17]. "Kosovo will be a homeland for everybody", he told me in an interview in Pristina. "I am going to do my utmost to assure minority rights, cultural heritage, Kosovo Serb integration into the democratic life and [into] both local and central government." But people like Ivanovic question Thaci's sincerity (and that of other politicians on both sides). "Kosovo Albanians are formally saying they are ready to meet the Kosovo Serbs' concerns but from my point of view they would rather speak

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with Belgrade", Ivanovic says. "Why? Well that is easy to explain because by talking to Kosovo Serbs they can gain nothing; we cannot give them independence." In northern Mitrovica, Dragana Jasnica, 18, agrees. "We are being manipulated and [politicians on all sides] have their own interests at heart."

In the November elections, the voter turnout overall was a meagre 45%, and among Kosovo Serbs only about 1%. Why was the figure on either side so low? Among Kosovo Albanians, the lack of trust in their politicians is reinforced by a feeling that in any case they have no real power until there is independence. Among Kosovo Serbs, there is a feeling that participating in elections [18] would serve as acknowledgment that Kosovo as a space operates separately from Serbia. "If I vote, it gives Kosovo legitimacy", says Stojan Jankovic, 53, standing in front of a barrel-fire near the polling-station in north Mitrovica.

In nearby Zvecan, 20 year-old engineering student Milos Marinkovic says he was not voting because he only votes in Serbian elections [18]. "There is nothing to vote on, this is our country, Serbia, and these are not our elections." Ivanovic says the government in Belgrade thinks they can control the situation for Kosovo Serbs by swaying [19] them not to vote and not to participate in any kind of government in Pristina. "Avoiding Kosovo Serb participation is exactly the way to get a monopoly over the issue", says Ivanovic. "To represent Kosovo Serbs from Belgrade, well if you do that, [representation] is not going to happen."

Islam Slaj, a 55 year-old Kosovar Albanian who lives in Serb-dominated north Mitrovica says that if he can live with Kosovo Serbs, then everyone should be able to live together. "I have lived here for fifty years and my living here shows that Serbs and Albanians can live together", he says, standing on the banks of the Ibar River that divides Kosovo geographically and literally. "It's the politicians who make the problems." Simic and Mehmeti, at least, would certainly agree.

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- [2] <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,522406,00.html>
- [3] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/12/10/wkosovo110.xml>
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- [5] <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5hkmJNeNXrx0UML4QjmzkAmhF5QgA>
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